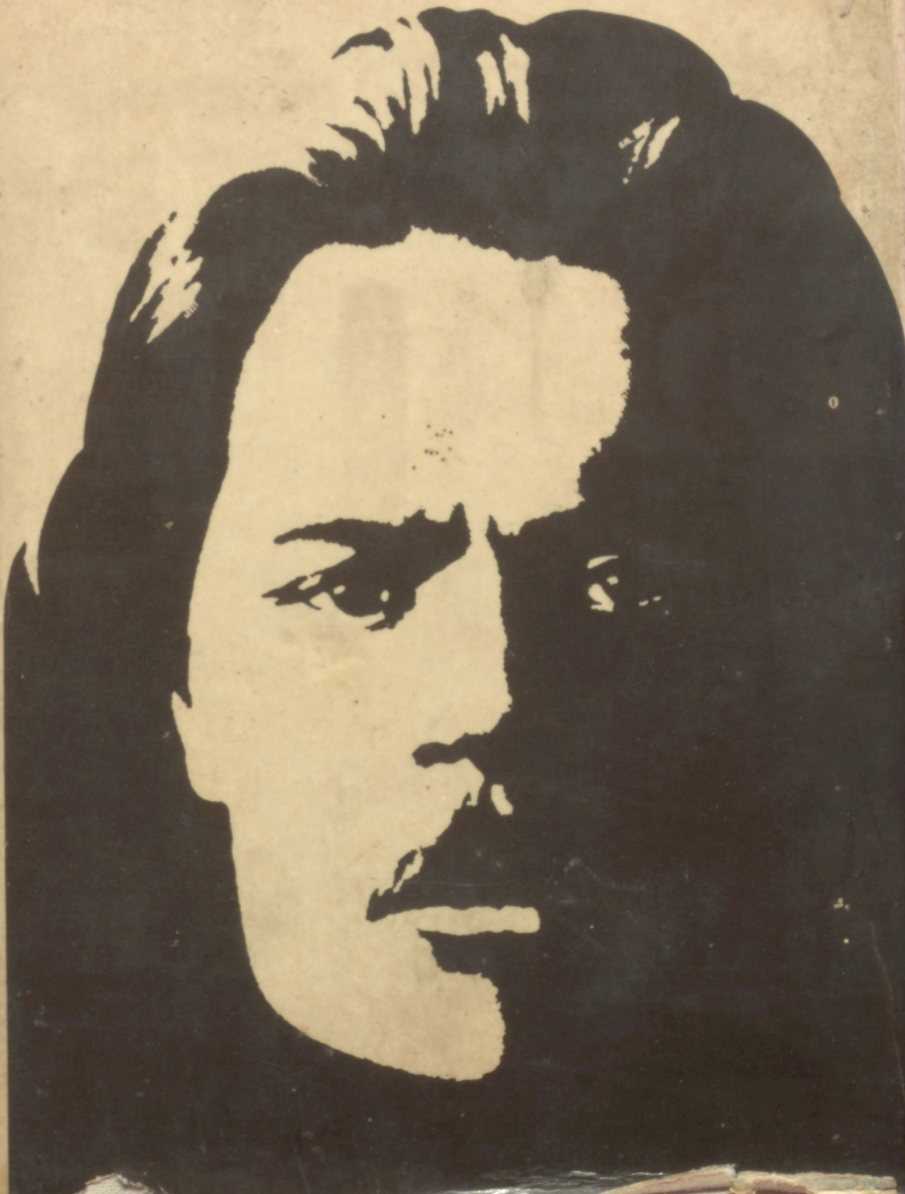
MAXIM GORKY



In 1978-1980 Progress Publishers, Moscow, will put out a 10-volume *Collected Works* by Maxim Gorky in English

Vol. 1 Selected Stories
Vol. 2 Foma Gordeyev
Vol. 3 Mother
Vol. 4 Plays
Vol. 5 The Life of Matvei Kozhemyakin
Vol. 6 Tales of Italy. Childhood
Vol. 7 My Apprenticeship My Universities
Vol 8 The Artamonovs
Vol 9 Literary Portraits
Vol. 10 On Literature

The translations are based on the centenary edition of the Complete Works prepared by the USSR Academy of Science's Institute of World Literature.

The first volume of this English edition contains introductory articles by Anatoly Lunacharsky and Leonid Leonov, and the last volume—Gorky's Chronicle of Life. Each volume is provided with notes and the last volume in the collection contains photographs comprehensively illustrating the life of the writer and his acquaintances in the literary world.

The first two volumes will come out in 1978

MAXIM GORKY

Collected Works in
Ten Volumes

Volume I

Selected Stories

Progress Publishers
Moscow

A Portrait

Anatoly Lunacharsky

I CONSIDER it a very great honour to have been asked to speak about Alexei Maximovich Gorky at this jubilee meeting *

I am not going to tell you Gorky's biography I should in any case be unable to recount this very rich, vivid and immensely eventful life, presenting it in a series of pictures—that is a task for which I lack both time and ability It calls for the skill of Gorky himself

Nor will I endeavour to give you even a brief history of Gorky's literary activity That has been done many times before

But in the spirit of this meeting I should like to give you a portrait of the man himself A literary portrait is, however, a very serious work of art, and calls for much hard work I should do well, therefore, to abandon the idea of tackling such a responsible task, and confine myself to giving you no more than a sketch

The most revealing and striking thing about Gorky's life is that it can be visualised as a soaring vertical line, it rises from the lower depths, almost from the very bottom of the Russian social world, as it was before the Revolution, and soars to heights reached by few men in history

Gorky was born into a guild craftsman's family, and from there he had to plunge down to even lower depths, the very depths he was repeatedly to describe with such inspiration In the bitter days of his youth he was to endure the most arduous forms of manual labour, he came to know what it meant to be hopelessly unemployed, learned the taste of hunger, beatings and humiliation From these lower depths,

* Excerpts from the speech delivered on the occasion of Gorky's 60th birthday — *Ed.*

as if endowed with wings, he was to shoot up and fly like a falcon into the brilliance of world fame He became a favourite with the best of the readers in this country and then went on to win world fame And today he has reached the topmost rung of this ladder, because the triumphant proletariat of our Union, for whom support echoes round the world, has now proclaimed him their most favourite writer and their greatest spokesman of the written word

His is a remarkable biography, and the vertically soaring line is a most profound characteristic of his work, both from the artistic and the social aspect

As a man who has drunk deep of the black waters at the very bottom of the sea of life, Gorky has an excellent knowledge of the reality, of the cumbersome and oppressive reality in which the majority of mankind lives, and in which, at any rate, the bulk of the subjects of tsarist Russia used to live he has personally tasted of its gall and mortification, and has seen thousands upon thousands of others around him in a similar plight

Gorky was filled with great bitterness and resentment at the humiliation of man and this developed into one of his dominant feelings from his early years He realised that those who could otherwise have been fine, upright men were depressed by this atmosphere, dehumanised and turned into malicious beasts Need I say that he did not for a moment hold it against them, because at bottom he regarded himself as one of them, he felt that he was an element of this dispossessed mass But the sense of gloom and resentment never prevailed in Gorky's works.

After all, we did have other writers, and talented men they were, too, who had also risen from the lower depths, and had also brought to our literature an acute sense of bitterness and wrong, among the Narodniks there were writers like Reshetnikov and Levitov, who of course were not so talented as Gorky but were nevertheless men of great endowments Why was it then that they were gradually ruined instead of growing to such stature as Gorky? The reason was that the dominant strand of their mind and

fabric of their soul was gloom If we do find in their writings a bright figure here and there, a dim ray contrasted with the darkness enveloping the whole of life, these are but timid, uncertain and wavering rays Unlike it, we discover in Gorky's very first works vibrant beams and see him carrying in his soul from the very outset a radiant and flaming star

His world outlook is also crowded with thick shadows, frightening and hateful, but they are offset by his tremendous faith in human happiness and in idealism, the type of idealism of which Engels once said you philistines think that we materialists have low horizons and selfish interests? Well, we are a thousand times more idealistic than you are because we are giving a powerful lead to the masses in their advance!

It is this practical idealism that you find in Gorky's every word

What is its source, how did a youth surrounded by such sombre impressions come to scintillate such faith in the possibility of happiness realised?

Gorky's biography provides an answer, and I don't believe we could find a better one anywhere There was good reason why the son, Alexei, took his father's name—Maxim—for his pen name It was that fine exuberant man, who fell victim to the evils of the lower depths of life, that left his indomitable spirit as a legacy to his son Besides, there was the temperament of Gorky's grandmother—whom we all love as our very own—which flowed in a free, broad, serene and elementally powerful current into her grandson's temperament, filling it with a remarkable poetic power

This is much more than mere genetics, it is social influence as well It was her songs, stories and caresses at the child's cradle and in his boyhood that created an atmosphere of such harmony and beauty, and built up in him those two different worlds a vision of how men ought to live, and how good that would be, and a knowledge of how things actually were! They stood poles asunder before him the appalling truth of life and the great urge for happiness, for peace, for

love, for a life sharply contrasting with the barbarous reality he had to face

The young Gorky started out with this dual view, with a tremendous awareness of the possibilities latent in man, and a great sensitivity for the reality around him

You all know what his life has been like You all know that it buffeted and bruised him It turned out to be merciless, and on a thousand occasions the very thread of his life seemed about to snap But he was strong by nature, and was tempered rather than ruined in these trials He laid up a great and sombre store of experience on the score of what life truly was, as created by the bourgeois system for the majority of mankind

And at an early age he felt the urge—I can't say how conscious it was—*to speak out* about all this in broad daylight and to have his ringing voice heard

At a rather early age he discovered the power of the press and imaginative writing His painful impressions may have gone into the building within him of uncommonly valuable tiers of consciousness, but the joyous and radiant encounters, on which he could draw for succour, were of very much greater importance than could have been expected

He learned to appreciate the role of the writer very early on He regarded himself, too, as a colossal workers' correspondent—as we now put it—though perhaps he did not imagine that he would be a colossus, but we, who know his stature, realise that he has been a great workers' correspondent He was a man who having found out how the "moles" lived, was prepared to give the "children of the sun" a brilliant, stupendously artistic report on the evils of life, on the horrors of those forms of existence revealing a mutilated mind, which he found flooding his country in a strong dark tide It was one of his tasks, how subjective a task I don't know, but at any rate, his objective task, to report on the life down there to the carefree dress-circle of the world, partaking of the pleasures of culture, to report as an eyewitness who had been through the circles of the inferno

I think that was why he took Gorky—the bitter one—as his *nom de plume*. That was his "visiting card", which told the readers of the world I am a *bitter* writer, and you will find galling the wine I have prepared for you to drink, my words will be distressing to your ears

And what happened—sudden and universal recognition!

First a handful of critics, then whole choirs of writers and Russian public men of the 1890s, who lived through an inner upheaval, told him it's not true, you are not bitter at all, you are sweet There is in you the sweetness of life's true joy, which is radiant and promising You have joined in the song of the springtime which is now about us Better times have begun with the '90s The shroud of snow has begun to shrink Some brooks have begun to babble, some new birds have begun to sing, and your voice has joined theirs It heralds the new, and a fresh and springtime joy seethes in it

Yet Gorky's writings, even his early romantic works, contained very little direct portrayal of happiness, they were done in gold, and vermilion, and purple, but for all that even his semi-fairytale characters tended to come to a more or less unhappy end

However, the strength of Gorky's joy did not lie in the portrayal of victories or the chanting of hallelujahs It often nestled in the dismal fabric of his story of how life actually was, because anyone who was even if in the smallest degree sensitive to literature felt that is what life is like, brethren, let us sit down and weep by the dark waters of Babylon where the winds of chance have brought us It was not the bitterness of despair which says a plague on life, and on myself as well No, indeed, Gorky said here is what you have done to life, here is the man it has fostered! But all this went hand in hand with Gorky's all-pervading faith in nature, in the beauty of life, and his firm belief that it can be splendid

He depicted dismal dramas against a background which no other writer had probably ever before created a laughing sea, a caressing sun, a velvety verdure, boundless vistas and mighty rivers—a marvellous nature which

Gorky's remarkable granny alone could sing and portray

This nature is inhabited by wondrous beasts and by wonderful men It is true that they have the ability to suffer, at first sight they appear to be vehicles for suffering, but the purpose of this is to make pain warn them away from dangers, on the other hand, they have everything to experience a wide range of exquisite joys From the tiny bird, to the beast, and up to the sage man, ever greater and deeper delights are open to all This capacity should be kept intact, all the possibilities for exercising it should be built up, that is the main point, then life can become an acme of delight, a marvellous and intelligent happiness

For all of us, the dark shadows which Gorky showed us stood out against this background of golden tracery Whenever we inhaled the bouquet or heard the chord, not only were our hearts lightened and we felt that we were striking out on a fresh spring road, but our blood began boiling, because a way out could be found only in struggle The evil was vast, man was horribly crippled and lived like a swine—and there was need for ruthless struggle to change all this and break through to a realisation of all of man's latent possibilities (in Marx' words, which Gorky may not have yet known, but which should always ring in our ears)

That was how Gorky's literary work looked at the time, and that is what made it social, although his social character had a far broader dimension even in his youth

What was his attitude to the various classes? How did he see them, and how did they impinge on his mind?

He had, especially in the first period of his activity, a deep-felt brotherly compassion for the simple folk, for the lower middle classes, and largely also for the peasants and the factory workers Whenever he portrayed their evil-mindedness, their fierce beating of their wives, their hatred for each other, whenever he presented all this gallery of downtrodden dreamers, victims and petty vultures, men who could have been wonderful idealists or vigorous builders of human life, you always felt that he did not put the blame on them but on their environment. Whenever

Gorky violently denounced some streak in a peasant, like greed or selfishness, you realised that he was not doing this because he was accusing him of it He was aware that the working man had been made coarse and rapacious by all the conditions of his life

Going up the rungs of the pre-revolutionary social ladder, Gorky passed judgement on the miserly philistine, the kulak, and the thief who built his foul welfare by bullying others But Gorky was not blinded by his contempt and hatred, and this enabled him to portray the philistine's soul with a clarity and realism that were unmatched before him and will apparently never by matched after him

Then he went on to consider the intelligentsia There he made distinctions He gave the creative intelligentsia, the workers in science and the arts, their due He always brought out the attitudes which are characteristic of the true workers in science and the arts, who are entirely dedicated to their work, and always had for them the greatest respect mingled with something like amazement

In considering men of true value, he was able to turn a blind eye on petty intellectualist traits of theirs which did not prevent him from seeing the tremendous importance of their creative effort and their great work for the benefit of culture

But he was ruthless to all the intellectualist philistines and vultures, the so-called "summer folk", the fair-weather friends, with their pettiness, their hypocrisy and their avidity, he showed no mercy for all these people who shed crocodile tears over the people's sad lot, but argued that this was "inevitable", people who invented sophisms to justify any sort of injustice The scars left by Gorky's literary scourging on the backs of these predators and wind-bags will take a long time to heal

He then went on to the capitalists

In the *Manifesto of the Communist Party*, Marx and Engels sang a virtual eulogy to the creative energies of the bourgeoisie, and Gorky appreciated this positive side of capitalism He had a wonderful knowledge of these men,

the men who began to run ships and barges along the Volga, to build factories and plants, men who had sufficient energy and knew how to work! But was he ever, for a moment, carried away? Not at all He was able, in fact, even at a time when he possibly still had no knowledge of Marx, to obtain a dialectic insight into the nature of their energy He showed that all its fruits were stamped with the base mark of self-interest and exploitation

He naturally declared ruthless war on the degenerating class of landowners and the repulsive tsarist bureaucracy As a very young man, he joined revolutionary circles and met revolutionaries He was soon put under surveillance, repeatedly arrested and harassed again and again, because the police were sensitive in their own way and divined in him a powerful enemy

A protester was Gorky's positive type For a long time he had a special affection for protesters, the square pegs who would not fit the round holes prepared for them These were men who would not accept life, who found themselves dislodged from it, not because they had fallen short of it, but because they had outgrown it In doing so they had lost their footing, and lacked the strength to overcome life These were men who had much moral but little physical strength

Gorky was always on the lookout for elements on whom he could rely, and he thought he had found them in the tramps. He was attracted by the fact that they were outcasts of society, that they had been dislodged from it The tramp had lost his property, he had lost his "identification papers", he had lost himself as a member of society, but had emerged free, like the wolf of the steppe who responds with a snarl to every threat and is prepared to defend himself at all times

The philistines themselves realised that this vagabond, who had thrown off the fetters of philistine morality, cut a majestic figure Gorky showed this by contrasting an intellectual, a barrister, who goes to pieces and drivels when he feels remorse at the gnawing awareness that he, a man of great parts, has become a domesticated beast of burden, and

the tramp, dirty, tanned and lacking in scruple, but hewn in one piece, free as the air and viewing with contempt home, wife, esteem and suchlike "benefits of life" Very many were stirred by Gorky's living image of the tramp for, they say, in the heart of every farm-yard duck there lives the memory of her wild days, and I have been assured—though I have never seen it myself—that the farm-yard duck is deeply animated by the honking of wild ducks on the wing overhead It was the wild duck that Gorky showed to the domesticated fowl

But Gorky was much too large and powerful a figure not to have overcome his infatuation with the romantic rebellion of the tramp He was a realist, and was not at all like the Finch who wanted to deceive the other birds with all kinds of colourful words But then neither was he like Luka,[1] the old consoler in *The Lower Depths*. Gorky himself told the actors and critics who were delighted with Luka, that he was a sly old fellow who was ready to apply a poultice to each man's sore, the quicker to be rid of him Gorky is not like that at all He may have fancied that sort of easy doctoring now and again, his soul may have felt the urge to engage in a bit of healing practice, but he was much too honest to become a Finch, and that is why he himself gave away the meaning of his "legend of the tramp" It could not have been otherwise, for had Gorky stopped at these characters, it would have meant that this country was doomed to ossification, and that it had no strength for revival

When he took a really close look at his tramps, he discovered that they tended to split up into two basic types First there were those who had a tendency to become man-tigers, these were the kings of thieves and prostitutes, the heroes of filthy marketplaces, with a yen for crime For all their superb muscular strength and their proficiency as males, they were morons who were incapable of becoming social beings They were essentially degenerate individualists and strong beasts of prey who had to be destroyed because to change them would be quite out of the question

On the other hand, Gorky saw among the tramps a wonderful and highly attractive type, whom he epitomised in *Konovalov* Konovalov was a remarkable type of man, highly sensitive and even something of a dreamer, but he had been drained of all his strength and had become a drunkard and a vagabond because he had been incapable of translating his dreams into reality It was the hopelessness of it all that ultimately led Konovalov to suicide Men of his stripe turn out to be whining neurasthenic intellectuals, who are absolutely unfit for struggle

Those are the two main channels sucking in the sick individualists, a talented world of men who have alienated themselves from society

No, leaving society was not the answer, it lies in seeking for the electrified metal that can effect a change inside the system itself And so little by little Gorky began to see—in occasional flashes of lightning—the revolutionary constructive role of the proletariat It was a revelation, and he sang a paean of praise to this discovery in his *Mother*, which is hymn of praise to the mighty camp of the revolution

Millions upon millions of men and women of the proletariat, speaking diverse languages throughout the world, found something dear to their hearts in this book, which has become the most favourite book of the proletarians of the world It told them of the sufferings of the Russian worker, a fighter against tsarism, a story that gripped the heart and awakened the best in men

It was this factory worker, this messiah of steel who enraptured Gorky by his enormity, his sense of collective action, his high degree of organisation, his revolutionary temperament, and the strength of his sound and vital energy And this made Gorky, the last prophet among those who had merely predicted the upheaval of all of life, and the first great writer to turn to the proletarian movement, say you are coming into the world to save it!

But at that time Gorky was no longer merely a talented writer He had already commanded tremendous moral

authority, trust, sympathy and fame He was striding forward in truly gigantic steps By that time he had sung the songs which had echoed in every honest heart, and which were being sung by everyone who was kindling the flames of the future revolution beneath the ponderous pillars supporting the autocratic edifice He sang of the Falcon, and the Stormy Petrel, both brimming with a fiery energy Like a gigantic figure—I clearly remember that is how I then imagined him—he towered in the shimmering twilight of the coming dawn in this country, with those expressive long hands of his reaching out across the earth, and with his magic brush emitting the sparks of his works that turned into flaming flowers

Gorky is a Bolshevik He brought with him into the Party a tremendous enthusiasm, an admiration for struggle and construction, a deep loyalty and a desire to respond with everything he had to the Party's requirements At one time he made some mistakes, and it is not for me either to censure or condone him because I was there making them with him Be that as it may, even I have long been forgiven them, to say nothing of Gorky

Even when Gorky joined us, the *Vperyod* group,* in deviating from the straight path, Lenin's affection for and confidence in him did not wane for a moment At that very time, as Lenin sent Gorky his talented, caustic and angry letters, which were full of affection for him, he continued to proclaim that Gorky was a real, truly proletarian writer, who had given the proletariat a great deal and was bound to give it ever so much more

May, 1928

Translated by Yuri Sdobnikov

* A "left" splinter group of the Bolsheviks of rather motley political and philosophical views It was formed in 1909 and lasted till February 1917 Lenin criticised the *Vperyod* group's mistakes on a number of occasions.—*Ed.*

A Word About Gorky*

Leonid Leonov

TODAY, progressive society all over the world is laying a commemorative wreath of honour and recognition at the feet of Maxim Gorky, undoubtedly our country's most influential writer and cultural figure in the historical period under review Although only one of the working currents in this infinitely complex if *fruitful* process, literature is nevertheless a living and fully autonomous instrument for fashioning human souls, and this determines its place in the planning of the future

Since they differ in force of impact or permanence, it is natural that works of art should have different destinies It is so arranged that the turbulent ninth wave subsides in a whisper of froth somewhere in the shallows, the furious Swift and Defoe come down to us as children's fairy-tales Passing through the mesh of the epochs and generations, only the pure gold reaches distant posterity Although the time is not yet ripe for a final evaluation of Gorky, it is already obvious that of the three outstanding Russian writers who stepped over the dividing line of the centuries with him, this master of the world and life influenced the public opinion of his age more extensively, if not more powerfully, than the other two Almost equals in potential talent, they differ considerably in their literary destinies Time will show to what extent Gorky's almost lightning rise to fame will affect and has already affected its subsequent course

The great occasion for which we are gathered here today binds us to sincerity—it should, indeed, serve as a frame for

* Address delivered by Leonid Leonov in the Kremlin Palace of Congresses at a session devoted to the 100th anniversary of Maxim Gorky's birth — *Ed.*

English translation © Progress Publishers 1978

the proposed wreath This is not one of the tributes which have become only too common in the last few years, when each pours a droplet of laudatory oil on the crown of the helpless sage who trembles with fear at the prospect of the impending osculations I must admit that such jubilees have always seemed to me not so much a reward for services rendered as retribution for inconsiderate longevity But the man whose anniversary we are celebrating is not with us this time only his deeds and his books are materially present in this hall The younger ones here may not even be able to state his age with conviction or describe what he looked like in his lifetime Gorky's image is steadily acquiring the marble abstraction of the famous philosophers, artists, teachers lining the vista that leads our gaze back to the sources of human culture

Nevertheless, of the great trio mentioned earlier, Gorky departed from us after Chekhov and Tolstoy, and that is why his image is still clearer with my generation We can still hear the hollow, slightly rounded vowels of that bass voice with the " how about it, eh?" that inevitably came at the end of the sentence and seemed to be an invitation to discuss the subject on equal terms We still cherish the precious muscular grip of his handshake, powerful as a secret password Each time, we see in our mind's eye the stern, tall figure bowed slightly as if under the weight of accumulated experience, unrecognisably different with friend and foe, refusing to make the slightest compromise at the expense of his views, frequently even to the detriment of an old friendship But this air of monastic austerity is invariably softened in my personal memory by the impression of friendly interest combined with an intently watchful eye for anything new—even mere trivialities on occasion—for the pearl of great discoveries loves to secrete itself in the most unprepossessing shell It always impressed me how much there was of *each* and *everything* in Gorky, and what stood out above all was his eager search for something outstanding in human activity, in the hope of further progress—whether it was a bold but as yet unformulated

scientific idea or a budding new talent Those who met him will remember his boundless delight in such finds, as if he himself had been enriched by them Indeed, any such success multiplied the host of those who shared his ideas, his comrades-in-arms in the never-ending battle for something universal, something that he had personally tried and tested the hard way, the most sacred thing on Earth, to which he had given the oath of loyalty on the threshold of his conscious life Indeed, he was himself prepared at any moment to engage in fisticuffs for *this something* Is that not why I always see him as endowed with a special athletic frame, strengthened by the long sinewy arms, almost like those of the boxers I remember so well from the entertainments of my childhood? I hope no one will be disconcerted by this unusual simile the truth is far more convincing and vivid when accompanied by a pair of strong fists, ready to fight for it!

There would seem to be no point in my wasting the time allotted to me on a list of Gorky's universally known works—it is much more important that they were all written in the same key In those distant years, the great plan to replough the whole of life was already ripening, and it was Gorky, who took it upon himself to train the personnel for the future as it was seen at that time—poetic, yet forceful, conditioned by the logic of social expedience, constructed of whole numbers and chemically pure elements not even encountered in nature, in an atmosphere almost sterilised of the contaminants accompanying every kind of life and without the statistical deviations that were subsequently to become noticeable . In a word, as always, *it* was sketched out in rough drafts of all the most noble dreams of a *just* life, beginning with the utopianists and even fifteen centuries earlier Consequently, the work that Gorky accomplished gives us grounds to call him not only the harbinger of humanist innovation, but one who bred better-quality strains of human seed to resow the planet, to replace what, mixed with tares, had been sown on the

grievous arable of mankind Special qualities—an unswerving purpose of will together with a passionate conviction and concentrated moral strength—are demanded for such a truly superior mission on earth, and perhaps even a prophetic faith in man as the main axis of the world around which pivots all the rest of secondary importance, including the heavenly bodies which were created solely for man and his requirements, because only man has it in his power to extract the long sought-after meaning and beauty from this crazed, dizzily whirling chaos Man with a capital "M" was Gorky's religion Was it not this unconditional faith in Man that gave him such authority over his younger contemporaries and absolute seniority among foreign humanists?

I remember Gorky most vividly, perhaps, during a journey from Sorrento towards Amalfi in the spring of 1931, when I had come to stay with him for the second time I was rash and bumptious in those days, and it seemed to me that it was more important for artists to *create* literature than to waste their time on fruitless arguments about it I don't remember how our conversation began, but Gorky reminded me at one point that Torquato Tasso had been born in Sorrento And then, for some reason, we had to look more closely from the cliff at the Tyrrhenian Sea, which the famous Italian poet admired in his youth There is a rocky promontory with a platform admirably suited for surveying the charms of the scenery in those parts Over the stone balustrade, somewhere far down below, a greenish, phantasmagorical abyss, rippling languidly, streamed away into nowhere As soon as we stepped out of the car, Gorky began to speak, through some closely associated logical transfer which, unfortunately, also escapes my memory, about the many kinds of humanist weapons, except that they were made not of metal, but of immaterial human *words* that had first been tempered by fire I remember now that, for some reason, never again did he speak in my presence more toughly, more implacably, or more colourfully I had no time to spare for a diary and I can only remember the gist of

Gorky's argument, but how useful it would have been if I had written it all down in time!

As I reconstruct it from memory, Gorky said that one can also hammer *words* into a magic sword for any *foul monster*, from the legendary hypostasis to the entirely concrete, in the form of the Russian autocracy This was a reference to the epigraph to Radishchev's *Journey* in Trediakovsky's translation "A vicious, many-headed, baying monster" The same sacred material, *words*, was used soon afterwards to forge the romantic blades of the Decembrists that were broken on the scaffold, exactly like the more realistic, more thoroughly sharpened, further-darting rapiers of the *revolutionary democrats*, as they called themselves I recall that Gorky mentioned someone else in between—Shchedrin, perhaps But as the last in a series of examples, this time negative in character, came one more illustrious Russian man-of-letters, completely unknown now, but at that time so dangerous, since he had been awarded his laurels from on high, that journals were closed down for a disrespectful review of his handiwork—a knight of countless Orders and court high dramatist, his Excellency Nestor Kukolnik, whose name alone has since become a bitter tract against its owner This most loyal and trusty writer was mentioned by Gorky as specimen of the typical journeyman who, either for the benefits of this life but, more likely, owing to sheer lack of talent, applied his modest gifts to the fashioning of ornamental regalia like those ceremonial mock swords which were donned with full-dress uniforms and silk shirts. It may be that, apart from the richly ornate hilt, any continuation in the form of a cutting blade simply did not exist Nor was it obligatory, since it was never drawn from its velvet scabbard in court usage And anyway it is doubtful whether that bit of metal could have been any use to a soldier for cutting a splinter or decapitating a chicken, let alone for the defence of the beloved homeland, about which our author held forth in his most important play Looking back after the event, I suppose that this shrewd parable, warning the young writer

against an easy living, came to Gorky's mind by an easily traceable train of thought our Kukolnik was the author of *Torquato Tasso*, a dramatic fantasy which caused some stir in its time, and Tasso himself had been a native of the region in which our conversation took place

I probably failed to catch everything Gorky was saying, because, as I listened eagerly to his ironic voice, I kept trying to find an explanation for the extraordinary power of his personality I listened and I kept glancing sideways at his figure, distinguished, as it always seemed to me, by a kind of rare human elegance, insofar as the word is applicable to a thinker Anyone who has met him will confirm my impression of that time it originated from the combination of the logical harmony of ideas and inner obsessiveness, from his vast life experience that had been gained in dozens of trades and explained the flexible and shrewd insight of what was, indeed, wisdom, but wisdom without the saddening signs of age that usually accompany it Incidentally, he was wearing his canonical broad-brimmed hat that day, the *bersalina* in which he was known to the world and all the common people of Russia, who called him Maxim with affectionate familiarity—with the asymmetrical, almost vertical moustaches, and the invariable blouse, wide-collared and faded midday blue in colour, under the light-grey jacket neatly caught in at the waist Beside me stood an acknowledged arbiter of the fundamental human virtues and the leader of two successive revolutionary generations—the teacher destined to formulate the civic testaments of the age and to overthrow monarchs, by all the parameters of his larger-than-life personality fit to be chairman of the world tomorrow—a broad-shouldered champion of invincible Novgorod stock, only from Nizhny Novgorod on the Volga by birth, from that galaxy of select Volga dwellers whom the turbulent, swift-flowing tide of our history carried ashore almost at the same time as Lenin

I may be forgiven some exaggerations of gratitude in this portrait In the early stages, before evil people intervened, I felt the inspiring charms of Gorky's friendship as a bonus to

his universally known letters and to the talks in private—that true Midas gift of enhancing the worth of everything he touched, of strengthening the creative urge in any self-doubting tyro whom he favoured What mattered to him was not to assume the ticklish and dangerous obligation of distributing encouragement on all sides, almost at the risk of damaging his own authority through the blunders and mistakes inevitable in such an uncertain matter, but first to win from the epoch this indisputable right which, to tell the truth, none of the authors living today has yet managed to acquire Gorky's gift for encouragement, compounded of goodwill and extraordinary patience, and also a flair for passing on instruction of which none of us have enough, can be explained by his obviously half belonging, at least, to that ascetic line of mentors, peculiar to our literature, who not only rejected entertainment in belles-lettres, but also the abstract contemplation of even the highest secrets of existence if these did not work for a realistic, tangibly up-to-date *mission* . and who looked upon the paramount aim of creativeness as the world-wide enrichment of the black ore of mundane existence, from which, by means of human toil, *happiness*, the main issue on the agenda, must be smelted In conformity with their leading dogma, according to which society is the supreme owner of all forms of material and spiritual property, including genius scattered like diamonds, they even strove to limit the activity of the latter solely to means of direct impact, best of all compared to firing pointblank from an open position which, as we ought to admit outright, owing to the brevity of the shot, is detrimental not only to the durability, but to the long-range fire-power of such works Judgement on our immortals in the last century was passed by the most intolerant of those mentors in accordance with the criteria of an equally magnified sense of civic responsibility There is no need to hide it how often in the twenties did we, who had not yet taken off our Red Army greatcoats and had only just set foot on the difficult path of our great Russian literature, have it drummed into us in a voice of iron that the aesthetics of

guns is in their technical expedience and all the rest comes from the devil, or perhaps from abroad? But even without compulsion, at extreme moments of the people's sufferings, legitimate concerns about the longevity of our offspring ceased to be our prime creative stimulus. Polonsky's theory about the wave and the ocean as applied to Russia is a guideline for the Russian writer to this day For in the present circumstances, too, there is no sense in creative works being polished to classical finish if it can so happen that no one will bother to read them During the early period, our pens frequently became too heavy for our hands to hold Given the vast scale of the epochal themes that towered before us, compelling a revision of yesterday's world with its gods and its laws, our lack of professional skill was complicated by the risk of getting into deeper waters than those in which RAPP* had instructed us to swim And it was then that Gorky came to the rescue of us, the younger writers.

Yes, it was Gorky who threw the idea of literary *service* like a bridge from the nineteenth century across to our own That is why there subsequently came into being the practice of *active* intervention by the writer in transforming the national economy that was to play such a vital role in the years of material socialist growth Even with his limited partiality for educationists—he was the most powerful of them all—Gorky, together with only a few others at that time, understood that for the correct management of the literary trade and to avoid irremediable fractures and mutilations among the literary young, it was necessary to make allowances in each case for the artist's creative constitution After all, the weal of society, which is the obligatory ultimate goal of any human activity, can be achieved not solely by a tocsin booming at the mind or by a peremptory challenge to immediate heroic achievement, but more effectively,

* Russian Association of Proletarian Writers—literary-political organisation active from 1925 to 1932 Leonid Leonov is alluding to the sectarian narrow-mindedness notable in the work of this society — *Ed.*

especially in art, by the tectonic reconstruction of human virgin terrain, by tunnelling upwards from the depths and environs of the human heart in order to change the moral topography of life from below, conferring on it that imperative relief when the human mass, obedient to the law of gravity itself, overflows unimpeded into the newly-formed dips and hollows It was then, during the scholastic years of RAPP, that Gorky inadvertently stated in one of our *unrecorded* talks that geniuses are united not by trade unions, and the concept of the artist's avocation does not coincide with a trade, that a major work will always be a concentrate of its creator's inner life as distinct from the platform ticket-machine functioning unfailingly as soon as it is fed with an algorithm in the form of a coin containing all the features of the anticipated product True, the application of such a method considerably simplifies the highly complex technology of our trade and even confers definite living advantages on some writers, but is ultimately contrary not only to common sense, but to the national interests as well Happily, it is given to far from everyone to align his pen on a bayonet, and the time eventually comes when the further application of this too versatile tool for delicate operations on the brain and heart can lead to undesirable consequences And so certain of today's writers recall with gratitude that, in spite of the differences in creative style already becoming noticeable at that time, Gorky was a big enough man not even to attempt to correct them after his own image Indeed, it is doubtful if, even given the most concentrated didactic massage, a Nikolai Chernyshevsky of mediocre quality could have been obtained from a Nikolai Leskov.

However, for all his broad-mindedness and consideration in dealing with young talents, always fragile in the early stages, Gorky himself brilliantly combined the demands of genuine art with the social effectiveness of his works. This great writer's creative life was closely interwoven with the history of his stormy times Apart from a few divergences, it coincided with the track of Revolution down

which Russia was moving towards its fiery future with thundering acceleration And again, let unprejudiced time show which of these two streams was the stronger in Gorky, in any case, it seems to me that it was precisely the harmonious combination of the two that determined the steepness of Gorky's spectacular rise to fame . It was only in 1890 that he met Korolenko, and then followed, as was natural for one who had learned writing from the prayer-book and the Psalter, ten years of literary gambits and experiments shared equally with newspaper work But suddenly the editions of his first short stories achieved the unheard of, for that time, figure of a hundred thousand copies, while the twenty-five thousand copies of his play "The Philistines" sold out in two weeks Following this first application for almost unlimited power over the minds of his contemporaries, came his crowning achievement, "The Lower Depths", a classic that toured all the stages of the world and plays to packed houses to this day At thirty-four years of age, overtaking his most famous predecessors, he was already an Honorary Academician of Russian letters, the scandal caused by the subsequent annulment of the title[1] merely doubled his popularity, and his second arrest, after January 9,[2] stirred a storm of protest—this time all over Europe . When he was thirty-eight, Gorky made his triumphal exit abroad to Sweden, Denmark and Germany, from where, incidentally, he was to undertake an open political demarche against the tsarist government. Finally, the land of the Yellow Devil, America, where the seventy-year-old Mark Twain headed a Committee for celebrations in honour of the distinguished guest, even if they never did take place after all! Oh, how the dried-up soil of Russia and the world thirsts for the refreshing rain!

Even after only a cursory glance through Gorky's epistolary heritage, especially volume twenty-six of his works,[3] one realises how generously he gave of himself, not only in his younger years but also on his final return to his homeland from abroad Future historians will have to explain—in the logic of that decade of course—why, and

how, significant event escaped his notice, evaluation, response, and immediate engagement in the fray The very thing that, according to Chekhov's dreamy estimate, would take a good three hundred years, Gorky strove to accomplish, if not tomorrow, then at least in his own time, and he put the whole of his rare creative will into the attempt to accelerate the coming of the Future all over the world In a word, going up like an explosion in the stagnant calm of the dying nineteenth century, he expended a great deal of mental and spiritual energy, and it is not surprising that so much in the course of the half century allotted to him should have been penetrated through and through, set and coloured by the charm of his all-embracing personality But this same unstinting generosity was inevitably bound, towards the end of his life, to bring Gorky—no, not to despair, but to the belated realisation that the expended energy would have been useful to him in recasting everything he had done into something of higher, more enduring value

Almost everyone in the decline of his mature years suffers from the agonising regret that he has failed to achieve something very important that was assigned to him at birth—a regret coming from the belated mastery of the most arcane secrets of his art and for this reason both agonising and futile Tyutchev expressed this sunset yearning better than anyone Insofar as we can tell from our modest observations at a distance and from below, this despair of the giants is not in the visible discrepancy between the portrait they drew and the original, but in their failure to fathom the full meaning of life, and this is only realised towards old age and clouds the enjoyment of what would seem to have been a duty so conscientiously fulfilled From that penultimate summit, once it has been achieved, a clearer view is gained of the gigantic panorama of the age and the landmarks of what we call human progress towards what we call stars there is greater understanding of the anatomy of human passions, and, finally, of the infinitely tangled complexities of reality, always more capacious than

our most assiduous unskilled retelling of it, even if we should attempt to make an upside-down mirror-image of the world in a vast, reverently silent ocean And here begins the third line in Russian literature—skirted by us, apart from the Enlightenment and the old Pushkin-Tolstoy tradition—consisting in the reflection of an event not in a document, but in the human soul itself, with primacy of the creative personality over the material, because only this way, as I see it, is it possible to identify the multiplicity of yet unknown, unrepeatable existences from the soulless, mathematical void around, in which there is so much of everything that there is almost nothing at all At such moments, the twilight of the great artist is darkened by the hurried, hasty and often fruitless search for some kind of *absolute* formula equivalent to the genuine truth, sketched invisibly before his time, as it were, on the virgin-white paper and real to such an extent that all he has to do is run his pen over it to obtain the imperishable masterpiece And here begins the silent and perhaps worst of all bloodless tortures, the *torture by paper* that swallows up the numbered days of genius. The signs of these grapplings with the self are easily traced in the manuscripts of all our literary forebears—probably in Gorky's rough drafts too, to which, incidentally, I never had the good fortune of access

As the years passed, Gorky more than once—either in a confiding letter or at a conference with young *shock workers from literature*, and also in a number of unrecorded talks, expressed the firm but nevertheless unfulfilled resolve of annealing his book in the fire of self-criticism, of sifting out everything that would posthumously go before the severe and unprejudiced judgement of time For some reason, there is no thought of the sunset at the high noon of life! And when Tolstoy said that of the thirty-five available volumes of Goethe, he would leave only two or three, he was most likely thinking also of his own enormous baggage-train of ninety volumes, in which were harnessed his greatest works, so light that they seem almost ready to take wing

Gorky, too, must have looked back on the road he had travelled This is invariably accompanied by regrets for the overlooked heat-escape that lowers the power of the working engine, although everyone realises that major works are always generated in the emotional plasma of preliminary and often subconscious efforts that comprise the initial phases of the yet unnamed masterpiece Subject to the scrutiny of the meticulous research scholar, these preliminary works frequently obscure and impoverish our *view of the miracle*, and hence one must consider it particularly right that the planned anniversary edition of Gorky's works is to be divided into three clearly defined series[4] representing the successive stages of the road from laboratory to final accomplishment

But if, despite the affirmations of the advanced sciences, Gorky himself could see us here this evening, from *beyond*, we would find reason to reject his apprehensions that he had not concentrated his powers on what is the true and most important function of the artist We would tell him that the regrets of a genius about what he has not accomplished are directly proportional to the magnitude of his achievement, that his first short stories, which reverberated so strongly in his own time, are continuing to do their work, because later generations, applying them to their ear like a sea-shell, can hear the growing roar of the revolutionary storm, that his trilogy, a classic work in form and brilliance of generalisation, which entered so completely into the consciousness of the Russia of those times, accommodating all the teeming, lower-depths reality that was already beginning to ferment, carries the reader to the sources of the October Revolution that was ultimately to decide the future of his country We would repeat something we told him in private, that in image-structure of delineation, the lyrical prose of *Childhood* deserves to become a manifesto for the realist school of the higher precision, and the portraits he drew of outstanding contemporaries will long continue to be models of the art of etching in words We would sum up all the most enthusiastic criticism of him—the profundity of

his aphoristic thought and wide-angle powers of observation that gave him the ability to crystallise an impression into absolute precision of epithet, into cadence, into the weightless pause, and, above all, the depictive accuracy of the descriptions and characterisation, and also the purity and freshness of his language, so that it captivated not only the enlightened classes of Russia, but the mass of the people for whom, basically, he strove to write Apart from the rapturous acknowledgement on the part of Gorky's coevals and colleagues of the pen, who often did not vanish into oblivion mainly because they were lucky enough to have been immortalised in their commentaries on his work, we would recall the respectful reactions of contemporary Western writers from Romain Rolland and H G Wells to Knut Hamsun and Stefan Zweig . .

The glory of the departed subject of this anniversary is, after all, not in the number of laurels laid on his tomb, but in the significant fact that so many of his countrymen of the next generation have gathered here on the hundredth anniversary of his birth to pay due honour to his memory and once more to feel on their faces the fresh breeze of his illustrious name

He is still so close to us, so alive to this day, so great and all-embracing, that it is not possible, in a short outline, to survey his vast personality with its annexes, attics and corridors leading in all directions Towards the end of his life, he used to be called, affectionately and half in jest, an *institution.* But with this vastness of his, the very choice of a point for reviewing Gorky's life inevitably tells us more about the painter himself Everything about that life is particularly important, but if I had to trace it stage by stage, I would not dwell on one of the periods of his ascent, success and maturity—with the reflections and vacillations that were inevitable in such a man for the process of literary gestation—but, in the manner that has become integral to my own artistic practice, I would devote most time to the examination of the first seed which had only just been cast into the furrow of life and from which there eventually came

that striking human explosion at the turning-point of the two centuries

And in the very germ of that seed I would put the discovery by the boy cook, Alyosha Peshkov, of Sergeant Smury's unobtrusive chest[5] with its treasure-store of old books To the adolescent Gorky this was like finding in the dense forest a bunch of magic keys to hitherto unsuspected doors opening out on to the vast world outside No effort is needed to imagine the boy's at first bewildered excitement and the number of truly Columbus-like discoveries that followed, so sadly inaccessible to the majority of us only because at too early an age of school we are deprived, perhaps, of life's most tremulous joy—to taste for a second time the delights of the discoveries offered to us One imagines that, after making a superficial acquaintance with his find, Alyosha's bewitchment must have yielded to a timid pride at belonging to a human race so mighty, so self-sacrificing and, for all its riches, so undeservedly suffering And, in its turn, from reverent silence at the first discovery of the treasure, there must have come the sense that never left Gorky all his life, of himself as a stream in a waterfall, or rather a gigantic *humanfall*, tumbling down on to the universal turbine of progress Gorky was strong in the consciousness of his *multiplicity*, and that was why every note of lyrical whining complaint at one's alleged loneliness in the world seemed so criminally blasphemous to him Every line that Gorky wrote is stamped with the impatience to bring nearer, to meet, to touch in life as soon as possible, the transformed virgin lands of the morrow, and it was on the satisfaction of this craving that he expended his tremendous gifts

A world unknown, untouched by anyone's revelatory interpretations lay hidden in the chest under the cot of Smury the cook And what visions were waiting for Alyosha under the lid that was pasted with appropriately exotic pictures—from the legendary invincible heroes of the Russian broadside classic to the sinister diabolical spirits personally observed by the alchemist and mystic

Eckartshausen! Incidentally, what a dangerous and deceptive trap this might seem to be for an inexperienced youth who was, moreover, setting out as a fighter and a proletarian writer, but in fulfilment of the ancient saying about the ability of the wise to extract advantage even from evil sources, he was able to penetrate through this same secret passage into the mysterious cellar of Russian freemasonry and, consequently, to learn something about the fantastic, truly powerful and to this day interesting 18th-century order which slipped away from the philistine only because they feared to overburden their brains, and which pursued, as so often happens, entirely prosaic earthly goals under the guise of creating a heavenly religion In my memory, this is particularly associated with one paradoxical remark of Gorky's, dropped casually as it would seem, on the usefulness of error in human culture as an intermediate stage, as negative experience frequently helping thought in the quest for truth As far as I remember, he even developed his suggestion along the lines that bad examples in literary works are sometimes more advantageous than a show of good ones, on condition, of course, that vice and crime are equated by the ethical norms of the punishment contained in them Not for nothing has the church, so successful in the nurturing of souls, always preferred to play on the minds of the congregation with pictures of hell's torments rather than with an immaterial heavenly bliss associated with physical and mental atrophy alike This also must be the source of Gorky's universally known curiosity about all kinds of heretics and heresies by whom and by which the forward march of any beneficial innovation has been commenced

On the other hand, the fabulous heroes from Smury's trunk, which were so close to the Hercules who cleansed life of evil and bestiality, also had to do with the nonexistent offspring of the devil, but here reality itself immediately set up, in place of ugly masks, real personages from the life of that time, at one extremity of which the fat of the land permanently roared and bubbled, while, at the other, .

poverty screamed at the top of its voice, intoxicated by its own wild dance In any case, experience of life at that time compelled Alyosha Peshkov, long before the appearance of the first romantic stories, to swear what may have been an unconscious oath of loyalty to what may have been a still abstract humanity, but a humanity that was already being united, not by national characteristics but by the woes of universal and foul injustice

This circumstance seems particularly important to me, because the future Maxim Gorky had to find his literary feet in Russia Let us say frankly that, since the times of Kurbsky,[6] they have not particularly adored our restless, inky tribe, eternally causing the authorities such a host of troubles for which, apart from the other often described reasons, there was yet another substantial one that is usually overlooked It is sometimes necessary to simplify the blueprint in order the better to understand the mechanism of the forces at work The immeasurable vastness of a country which it took fifteen days and nights to cross by fast passenger express at that time, naturally created in the capital certain specific phenomena among which were structural compression and raised temperature evidently, the law of gravity that restrains the heavenly body from being hurled outwards by centrifugal force is also fully applicable to great and far-flung empires Does not the fate of Russian literature differ from other world literatures for just that reason? And, who knows, perhaps this extreme, experimental, unprecedented—and perhaps even inconceivable—*St Petersburg* state of human matter, contributed to its greatness all through the last century

In a word, the heroic road travelled by Russian literature for a century and a half until Gorky's times truly deserves homage from the rest of the world Lo and behold!—the Russian bard and professor of eloquence whom we have already mentioned, Vassily Trediakovsky, brings the syllabic fruits of his nocturnal exercises to his most gracious empress in no other wise than on his hands and knees all the way

from the door to the throne, balancing those ill-fated verses on his periwig on the back of his bowed literary neck But twenty-one years after his demise, under the next empress, another Russian man of letters who, incidentally, spoke most favourably of Trediakovsky, namely, Alexander Radishchev, decides—oh horror!—to offer for public discussion the disastrous plight of the serfs[7] in his country, and nine years after his public denunciation, a great poet is born—this also in St Petersburg—who will present his literary descendants with a message that will last for all time I am turning to this name so dearly cherished by us because, naturally enough, the works of Alexander Pushkin were also in the precious Smury trunk

I refer to what is, in my opinion, the greatest poem written in the whole of our nineteenth century It was echoed by Lermontov in a troubled voice of readiness for mortal sacrifice almost on the eve of his fatal duel, it was equally treasured by Tolstoy, and was read on every suitable occasion by Dostoyevsky, blenching and gasping for breath This work, which has brought down to us the stamp of tragic self-immolation, of the resolve to fulfil one's duty to humanity at all costs, is also impressive in that it was written by Pushkin when he was twenty-seven years of age, presumably under the fresh impression of the tragic event that had only just affected him personally * The thought involuntarily comes to mind did not tsar Nicolas' penetrating censorship let it through because the participation of an angel belonging to the highest ranks of the hierarchy seemed to rule out any seditious intent in the poem?

This piece is entitled *The Prophet*, which is the Latin analogue of *poet*. It describes, stage by stage, the agonising process of poetic dedication It is not to be ruled out that a

* In 1826 the leaders of the Decembrists' uprising were executed Pushkin was deeply upset by the death of men who were so close to him in spirit, but he remained true to the advanced ideas of his time — *Ed.*

vague glimpse of his future *nom de plume* came to Alexei Peshkov as soon as he read it I am even prepared to allow that he cried out with pain at the fifteenth line, when—

My sinful tongue
And sly from out my mouth he wrung,
And this with bloody hand removing,
O'er me he did relentless lean
And push a serpent's sting between
My deadened lips ..

If it were in my power, I would introduce the obligatory recitation of these lines in chorus at all the most important *assemblies* of writers! I make the reservation that no one should be perturbed by the comparison of literary talent to the above-mentioned unprepossessing creature with a rather questionable reputation Snake venom, if used at the right time, heals, and in the emblem of medicine a snake is depicted over a specially wide cup so that not a drop should be spilled in vain It has also been confirmed that, in spite of the baleful effect of this malignant substance, it is also vitally necessary in literary usage Endowed with the property, in its pure form, of killing outright, if unconscientiously employed in literature it can produce hybrids for the killing of others, although its compulsory extraction from ink may cause a long period of literary stagnation However, in dilute form, in conformity with the prescription tried and tested down the ages by the aesthetic pharmacopoeia, it is indeed a powerful medicinal bitter that ensures the greatness of our art and the moral health of the nation in equal measure and, consequently, the fortitude of the social organism All the books by the writer Gorky are downright bitterish to the mind Is it not that in which their life-giving hormone virtue consists?

For some reason, all the most celebrated remedies, with the classic aloe at the top of the list, are bitter to the taste, since time immemorial, the Russian farmer's mighty bread, also washed down with sour kvass, had a tang of wormwood,

and, of course, there is no scent more satisfying to the soul than the acrid haze over the camp-fire, and no one seems able to remember a time when in our best and, it must be admitted, sometimes extremely sad songs, was praise ever afforded to the consoling sweetness of refined sugar, the abuse of which, according to the striking popular tradition, results in the birth of extremely sickly and scrofulous children It is not for nothing that the headstone on Gogol's grave is inscribed with a quotation about incorruptible wise bitterness from the *embittered* Jeremiah, who was stoned to death for denouncing kings and the mob See into what dreamy distances we are borne by the genealogy of that most trusty remedy for historical blindness, the catalyst of civic virtues, the noble toughening agent for the ploughshare and the sword blade—*bitterness.* Perhaps even in our days, fraught with peril, the bitter and warning word is far more useful than the soporific dulcimer True, the string plucked by Boyan,* if of good quality, and Chapayev's sabre are both made of the same metal that has gone through the annealing fire, but not all well-meaning words will be able, in the hour of danger, to substitute for Zlatoust steel tried and tested by our grandfathers Was it not for this salutary bitterness that the wave of nation-wide acclaim raised Maxim Gorky so high above his contemporaries and carried him to our times on its crest?

There will be another evening like this one sometime in the next century, but we shall not be there Others who have yet to enter this world, who have not yet been born will take over our seats in this hall but however precious their time may be, it is inconceivable that they will not periodically remember us, who spent for their sake, the people of tomorrow, so much life, so much scalding sweat and so much inspiration—ourselves! We shall not be flattered by excessive hope from our own experience, we know how unnecessary to later generations are the idols and predilections of their grandfathers But each time, as they

* Boyan—legendary Russian bard — *Ed*

look back at our era with its unfading glow of great battles, epochal conflagrations and bivouac fires on the road to the promised land, they will discern, among the other gigantic shadow, against the background of a flaming sky, the characteristic stooping figure of Maxim Gorky From under his hand as he shades his eyes, with the same unique, slightly ironic, approving smile, he will peer inquiringly after them, the generations going forward and further all the time, in whom he had so much faith—orator, poet, rebel, father and mentor of Man on Earth

Translated by Alex Miller


Progress
Publishers
Moscow


MAXIM
GORKY

MAXIM GORKY

Collected Works in
Ten Volumes

Volume I

Selected Stories

Progress Publishers
Moscow

Translated from the Russian
Designed by Igor Kravtsov

М ГОРЬКИЙ
Собрание сочинений
в 10 томах
Том 1

Избранные рассказы

На английском языке

С-48561

Printed in the Union
of Soviet Socialist Republics

70302—786
Г———— 128-78
014(01)—78

Contents

	page
Makar Chudra *Translated by Margaret Wettlin*	41
My Travelling Companion *Translated by Avril Pyman*	56
Grandfather Arkhip and Lyonka *Translated by Bernard Isaacs*	90
Old Izergil *Translated by Margaret Wettlin*	116
Chelkash *Translated by Margaret Wettlin*	141
One Autumn *Translated by Avril Pyman*	177
Song of the Falcon *Translated by Margaret Wettlin*	187
For Want of Something Better to Do *Translated by Margaret Wettlin*	193
Konovalov *Translated by Margaret Wettlin*	213
The Orlovs. *Translated by Margaret Wettlin*	267
The Reader *Translated by Robert Daglish*	331
Twenty-Six Men and a Girl *Translated by Bernard Isaacs*	348
Song of the Stormy Petrel *Translated by Margaret Wettlin*	364
The Ice Is Moving *Translated by Avril Pyman*	366
A Man Is Born *Translated by Bernard Isaacs*	394

The Creepy-Crawlies *Translated by Bernard Isaacs* 406
First Love *Translated by Margaret Wettlin* 425
Tales of Heroes *Translated by Robert Daglish* 457
Notes 501

Makar Chudra

A cold damp wind blew from the sea, wafting over the steppe the pensive melody of the waves breaking on the shore and the rustle of dry bushes Now and then a gust would lift up some shrivelled yellow leaves and whirl them into our camp-fire, causing the flames to flare up, then the darkness of the autumn night would shudder and start back in fright, giving us a glimpse of the boundless steppe to the left, the boundless sea to the right, and in front of me—the form of Makar Chudra, an old Gypsy who was keeping watch over the horses belonging to his camp pitched some fifty paces away

Heedless of the cold wind that blew open his *caftan* and struck mercilessly at his bare hairy chest, he lay facing me in a graceful and vigorous pose, drawing regularly at his enormous pipe, emitting thick clouds of smoke through his nose and mouth, gazing fixedly over my head into the silent darkness of the steppe, talking incessantly and making not the slightest effort to protect himself from the vicious attacks of the wind

"So you go tramping about the world, do you? Good for you You have made the right choice, young falcon That is the only way Go about the world seeing things, and when you have looked your fill, lie down and die

"Life? Your fellowmen?" he queried on hearing my objections to his "That is the only way" "Why should you worry about that? Are not you life itself? And as for your fellowmen, they always have and always will get on famously without you Do you really think anybody needs you? You are neither bread nor a stick, and so nobody wants you

"Learn and teach others, you say Can you learn how to make people happy? No, you cannot Wait until your hair is

grey before you try to teach others What will you teach them? Every man knows what he needs The wise ones take what life has to offer, the stupid ones get nothing, but each man learns for himself

"A curious lot, people they all herd together, trampling on each other, when there is this much space—" and he made a sweeping gesture out towards the steppe "And all of them work What for? Nobody knows Whenever I see a man ploughing a field I think to myself there he is pouring his strength and his sweat into the earth drop by drop, only to lie down in that very earth at last and rot away He will die as big an ignoramus as he was born, leaving nothing behind him, having seen nothing but his fields

"Is that what he was born for—to dig in the soil and die without having had time even to dig himself a grave? Has he ever tasted freedom? Has he a knowledge of the vastness of the steppe? Has his heart ever been cheered by the murmur of the sea? He is a slave—a slave from the day of his birth to the day of his death What can he do about it? Nothing but hang himself, if he has the sense to do that

"As for me, at fifty-eight I have seen so much that if it were all put down on paper, a thousand bags like the one you have there would not hold it all Can you name a land I have not seen? You cannot. I have been to places you have never even heard of That is the only way to live—moving from one place to another And never stop long in one place—why should you? Just see how day and night are always moving, chasing each other round the earth, in just the same way you must chase away your thoughts if you do not want to lose your zest for life One is sure to lose it if he broods too much over life Even I did once; I did indeed, young falcon

"It was when I was in jail in Galichina[1] Why was I ever born? I thought in my misery It is a great misery to be locked up in jail—ekh, what a misery! My heart was gripped as in a vice every time I looked out of the window at the open fields Who can say why he was born? No one can, and one should never ask himself such a question Live, and be

thankful to be alive Roam the earth and see what there is to see, and then you will never be miserable Ah, but I almost hanged myself with my belt that time

"Once I had a talk with a certain man A stern man he was, and a Russian, like you A person must not live as he likes, he said, but as is pointed out in the word of God If a man lives in obedience to God, he said, God will give him whatever he asks for He himself was dressed in rags and tatters I told him to ask God for a new suit of clothes He was so angry he cursed me and drove me away But just a minute before he had said one ought to love his neighbours and forgive them Why did he not forgive me if I had offended him? There's your preacher for you! They teach people to eat less, while they themselves eat ten times a day "

He spat into the fire and was silent as he refilled his pipe The wind moaned softly, the horses whinnied in the darkness, and the tender impassioned strains of a song came from the Gypsy camp It was Nonka, Makar's beautiful daughter, who was singing I recognised the deep throaty timbre of her voice, in which there was always a note of command and of discontent, whether she was singing a song or merely saying a word of greeting The haughtiness of a queen was frozen upon her swarthy face, and in the shadows of her dark eyes glimmered a consciousness of her irresistible beauty and a contempt for everything that was not she

Makar handed me his pipe

"Have a smoke She sings well, doesn't she? Would you like to have a maid like that fall in love with you? No? Good for you Put no faith in women and keep away from them A maid gets more joy out of kissing a man than I do out of smoking my pipe But once you have kissed her, gone is your freedom She holds you with invisible bonds that are not to be broken, and you give yourself to her heart and soul That is the truth Beware of the maids They always lie! She swears she loves you above all else, but the first time you cause her a pin-prick she will tear your heart out I know what I say There are many things I know If you wish, I will

tell you a true tale Remember it well, and if you do, you will be as free as a bird all your life

"Once upon a time there was a young Gypsy named Zobar—Loiko Zobar He was a fearless youth whose fame had spread throughout Hungary and Bohemia and Slavonia and all the lands that encircle the sea There was not a village in those parts but had five or ten men sworn to take Zobar's life, yet he went on living, and if he took a fancy to a horse, a regiment of soldiers could not keep him from galloping off on it Was there a soul he feared? Not Zobar He would knife the devil himself and all his pack if they swooped down on him, or at least he would curse them roundly and give them a cuffing, you can be sure of that

"All the Gypsy camps knew Zobar or had heard of him The only thing he loved was a horse, and that not for long When he had tired of riding it he would sell it and give the money to anyone who asked him for it There was nothing he prized, he would have ripped his heart out of his breast if he thought anyone had need of it That was the sort of man he was

"At the time I am speaking of—some ten years ago—our caravan was roaming through Bukovina A group of us were sitting together one spring night—Danilo, a soldier who fought under Kossuth[2] old Nur, Radda, Danilo's daughter, and others

"Have you seen my Nonka? She is a queen among beauties But it would be doing her too great an honour to compare her with Radda No words could describe Radda's beauty Perhaps it could be played on a violin, but only by one who knew the instrument as he knew *his own soul*

"Many a man pined away with love for Radda Once in Morava[3] a rich old man was struck dumb by the sight of her There he sat on his horse staring at her and shaking all over as if with the ague He was decked out like the devil on holiday, his Ukrainian coat all stitched in gold, the sabre at his side set with precious stones that flashed like lightning at every movement of his horse, the blue velvet of his cap like a patch of blue sky He was a very important person, that old

man He sat on and on staring at Radda, and at last he said to her 'A purse full of money for a kiss!' She just turned her head away This made the rich old man change his tune 'Forgive me if I have insulted you, but you might at least give me a smile,' and with this he tossed his purse at her feet, and a fat purse it was But she just pressed it into the dust with her foot, as if she had not noticed it — *

"'Ah, what a maid!' he gasped, bringing his whip down on his horse's flank so that the dust of the roadway rose in a cloud as the horse reared

"He came back the next day 'Who is her father?' he asked in a voice that echoed throughout the camp Danilo came forward 'Sell me your daughter Name your own price ' 'It is only gentlemen who sell anything from their pigs to their consciences,' said Danilo 'As for me, I fought under Kossuth and don't traffic in anything ' The rich man let out a roar and reached for his sabre, but someone thrust a lighted tinder into his horse's ear and the beast went flying off with its master on its back We broke camp and took to the road When we had been on the way two whole days, we suddenly saw him coming after us 'Hey!' he cried 'I swear to God and to you that my intentions are honest Give me the maid to wife I will share all that I own with you, and I am very rich ' He was aflame with passion and swayed in his saddle like feather-grass in the wind We thought over what he said

"'Well, daughter, speak up,' muttered Danilo into his beard

"'If the eagle's mate went to nest with the crow of her own free will, what would you think of her?' said Radda

"Danilo burst out laughing and so did the rest of us

"'Well said, daughter! Have you heard, my lord? Your case is lost! Woo a turtle-dove—they are more docile ' And we went on our way

"At that the rich man pulled off his hat and hurled it down on the ground and rode off at such speed that the earth shook under his horse's hooves That was what Radda was like, young falcon

"Again one night we were sitting in camp when all of a sudden we heard music coming from the steppe Wonderful music Music that made the blood throb in your veins and lured you off to unknown places It filled us all with a longing for something so tremendous that if we once experienced it there would be no more reason to go on living, and if we did go on living, it would be as lords of the whole world

"Then a horse came out of the darkness, and on the horse a man was sitting and playing the fiddle He came to a halt by our camp-fire and stopped playing, looking at us and smiling

"'Zobar! So it is you!' called out Danilo heartily

"This, then, was Loiko Zobar His moustaches swept down to his shoulders, where they mingled with his curly hair, his eyes shone like two bright stars, and his smile was the sun itself It was as if he and his horse had been carved of one piece There he was, red as blood in the firelight, his teeth flashing when he laughed Damned if I did not love him as I loved my own self, and he had not so much as exchanged a word with me or even noticed my existence

"There *are* people like that, young falcon When he looked into your eyes your soul surrendered to him, and instead of being ashamed of this, you were proud of it You seemed to become better in his presence There are not many people like that Perhaps it is better so If there were a lot of good things in the world, they would not be counted good But listen to what happened next.

"Radda said to him 'You play well, Zobar Who made you such a clear-voiced fiddle?' 'I made it myself,' he laughed 'And not of wood, but of the breast of a maiden I loved well, the strings are her heart-strings It still plays false at times, my fiddle, but I know how to wield the bow'

"A man always tries to becloud a girl's eyes with longing for him so that his own heart will be protected from the darts of those eyes. And Zobar was no exception But he did not know with whom he was dealing this time Radda merely turned away and said with a yawn 'And they told me Zobar

was wise and witty What a mistake!' And she walked away

"'You have sharp teeth, my pretty maid!' said Zobar, his eyes flashing as he got off his horse 'Greetings to you, friends I have come to pay you a visit'

"'We are glad to have you,' replied Danilo

"We exchanged kisses, chatted a while and went to bed We slept soundly In the morning we found Zobar with a bandage round his head What had happened? It seemed his horse had kicked him in the night

"Ah, but we knew who that horse had been! And we smiled to ourselves, and Danilo smiled Could it be that even Zobar was no match for Radda? Not at all Lovely as a maid may be, she has a petty, shallow soul, and all the gold trinkets in the world can not add one kopeck to her worth

"Well, we went on living in that same place Things were going well with us, and Loiko Zobar stayed on He was a good companion—as wise as an old man, and very knowing, and able to read and write Russian as well as Magyar I could have listened to him talk the night through, and as for his playing—may the lightning strike me dead if there ever was another his equal He drew his bow once across the strings and the heart leaped up in your breast, he drew it again and everything within you grew tense with listening—and he just went on playing and smiling It made you want to laugh and cry at the same time Now someone was moaning bitterly and crying for help, and it was as if a knife were being turned in your side, now the steppe was telling a tale to the sky—a sad tale Now a maid was weeping as she said farewell to her lover Now her lover was calling to her from the steppe And then, like a bolt from the blue, would come a gay and sweeping tune that made the very sun dance in the sky That was how he played, young falcon!

"You felt that tune with every fibre of your body, and you became the slave of it And if at that moment Zobar had called out 'Out with your knives, comrades!' every man of us would have bared his knife against anyone he pointed out. He could wind a person round his little finger, but everyone loved him dearly Yet Radda would have nothing

to do with him That was bad enough, but she mocked him besides She wounded his heart and wounded it badly He would set his teeth and pull at his moustache, his eyes deeper than wells, and at times something would flash in them that struck terror into your heart At night he would go far into the steppe and his violin would weep there until morning—weep for his lost freedom And we would lie and listen and think to ourselves what will happen next? And we knew that when two stones are rolling towards each other, they will crush anything that stands in their way That was the way things were

"One night we sat for long round the fire discussing our affairs, and when we got tired of talking, Danilo turned to Zobar and said 'Sing us a song, Zobar, to cheer our hearts' Zobar glanced at Radda who was lying on the ground not far away gazing up at the sky, and he drew his bow across the strings The violin sang out as if the bow were really being drawn over a maiden's heart-strings And he sang

Hi ho, hi ho! My heart is aflame,
The steppe is like the sea,
And like the wind, our gallant steeds
Are bearing you and me

"Radda turned her head to him, propped herself up on one elbow and laughed in his face Zobar flushed crimson

Hi ho, hi ho! My comrade true,
The hour of dawn is nigh,
The steppe is wrapped in shades of night,
But we shall climb the sky
Spur on your horse to meet the day
That glimmers o'er the plain,
But see that lovely Lady Moon
Is touched not by its mane!

"How he sang! No one sings like that nowadays But Radda murmured under her breath

"'I would not climb so high if I were you, Loiko Zobar You might fall down into a puddle and spoil those lovely moustaches of yours'

"Zobar threw her a furious glance, but said nothing He was able to control himself and go on singing

Hi ho, hi ho! If daylight comes
And finds us both asleep,
Our cheeks will burn with crimson shame
As out of bed we leap

"'A splendid song,' said Danilo 'Never have I heard a better one, may the devil turn me into a pipe if I have!'

"Old Nur stroked his whiskers and shrugged his shoulders, and all of us were pleased with Zobar's brave song But Radda did not like it

"'Once I heard a gnat trying to imitate the eagle's call,' she said It was as if she had thrown snow in our faces

"'Perhaps you are longing for a touch of the whip, Radda,' drawled Danilo, but Zobar threw down his cap and said, his face as dark as the earth

"'Wait, Danilo! A spirited horse needs a steel bridle! Give me your daughter to wife!'

"'A fine speech,' chuckled Danilo 'Take her, if you can'

"'Very well,' said Zobar, then, turning to Radda 'Come down off your high horse, maid, and listen to what I have to say I have known many a girl in my day—many, I say—but not one of them ever captured my heart as you have Ah, Radda, you have enslaved my soul It cannot be helped —what must be will be, and the horse does not exist that can carry a man away from himself With God and my own conscience as witness, and in the presence of your father and all these people, I take you to wife But I warn you not to try to curb my liberty, I am a freedom-loving man and will always live as I please' And he walked up to her with set teeth and blazing eyes We saw him stretch his hand out to her, and we thought at last Radda has put a bridle on the wild colt of the steppe But suddenly Zobar's arms flew out and he struck the ground with the back of his head

"What could have happened? It was as if a bullet had struck him in the heart But it was Radda who had flicked a whip about his legs and jerked it That was what had made him fall

"And again she was lying there motionless, a scornful smile on her lips We watched to see what would happen next Zobar sat up and held his head in his hands as if he were afraid it would burst, then he got up quietly and went out into the steppe without a glance at anyone Nur whispered to me 'You had better keep an eye on him ' And so I crept after him into the steppe, in the darkness of the night Think of that, young falcon "

Makar scraped the ashes out of the bowl of his pipe and began to refill it I pulled my coat tighter about me and lay back, the better to study his aged face, bronzed by sun and wind He was muttering to himself, emphasising what he said by shaking his head gravely, his grey moustaches twitched and the wind ruffled his hair He reminded me of an old oak which has been struck by lightning but is still strong and powerful and proud of its strength The sea went on whispering to the sand, and the wind carried the sound to the steppe Nonka had stopped singing The clouds that had gathered made the autumn night darker than ever

"Loiko dragged one foot after the other as he walked, his head drooping, his arms hanging as limp as whip-cords, and when he reached the bank of a little stream he sat down on a stone and groaned The sound of that groan nearly broke my heart, but I did not go near him Words cannot lessen a man's grief, can they? That is the trouble He sat there for an hour, for another, for a third without stirring, just sitting there

"I lay not far away The sky had cleared, the moon bathed the whole steppe in silver light so that you could see far, far into the distance

"Suddenly I caught sight of Radda hurrying towards us from the camp

'I was overjoyed Good for you, Radda, brave girl' thought I She came up to Zobar without his hearing her

She put her hand on his shoulder He started, unclasped his hands and raised his head Instantly he was on his feet and had seized his knife God, he'll kill her, I thought, and was about to jump up and raise the alarm when I heard

"'Drop it or I'll blow your head off!' I looked there was Radda with a pistol in her hand aimed at Loiko's head A very daughter of Satan, that girl! Well, I thought, at least they are matched in strength, I wonder what will happen next

"'I did not come to kill you, but to make peace,' said Radda, pushing the pistol into her belt 'Put away your knife ' He put it away and gazed at her with fuming eyes What a sight that was! These two staring at each other like infuriated beasts, both of them so fine and brave! And nobody saw them but the bright moon and me

"'Listen, Zobar, I love you,' said Radda He did nothing but shrug his shoulders, like a man bound hand and foot

"'Many a man have I seen, you are the bravest and handsomest of all Any one of them would have shaved off his moustaches had I asked him to, any one of them would have fallen at my feet had I wanted him to But why should I? None of them were brave, and with me they would soon have gone womanish There are few brave Gypsies left, Zobar—very few Never yet have I loved anyone, Zobar But I love you And I love freedom, too I love my freedom even more than I love you But I cannot live without you any more than you can live without me And I want you to be mine—mine in soul and body, do you hear?'

"Zobar gave a little laugh 'I hear,' he said 'It cheers my heart to hear what you say Speak on '

"'This is what else I would say, Zobar do what you will, I shall possess you, you are sure to be mine And so waste no more time My kisses and caresses are awaiting you—and I shall kiss you passionately, Zobar! Under the spell of my kisses you will forget all the brave life of the past No longer will your gay songs, so beloved by the Gypsies, resound in the steppe, now shall you sing soft love songs to me alone—to Radda Waste no more time This have I said,

which means that from tomorrow on you will serve me as devotedly as a youth serves an elder comrade And you will bow at my feet before the whole camp and kiss my right hand, and then only shall I be your wife '

"This, then, was what that devilish girl was after Never had such a thing been heard of True, old people said that such a custom was held among the Montenegrins in ancient times, but it never existed among the Gypsies Could you think of anything more preposterous, young man? Not if you racked your brains a whole year

"Zobar recoiled and the steppe rang with his cry—the cry of one who has been mortally wounded Radda shuddered, but did not betray her feelings

"'Good-bye until tomorrow, and tomorrow you will do what I have said, do you hear, Zobar?'

"'I hear I shall do it,' groaned Zobar and held out his arms to her, but she went away without so much as glancing at him, and he swayed like a tree broken by the wind, and he fell on the ground, sobbing and laughing

"That was what she did to him, that accursed Radda I could hardly bring him back to his senses

"Why should people have to suffer so? Does anyone find pleasure in hearing the groans of one whose heart is broken? Alas, it is a great mystery

"When I got back to camp I told the old men what had taken place We considered the matter and decided to wait and see what would happen And this is what happened In the evening when we had gathered about the fire as usual, Zobar joined us. He was looking downcast, he had grown haggard in that one night and his eyes were sunken He kept them fixed on the ground and did not raise them once as he said

"'This is how things are, comrades I searched my heart this night and found no room in it for the freedom-loving life I have always lived Radda has taken up every corner of it There she is, the beautiful Radda, smiling her queenly smile She loves freedom more than she loves me, but I love her more than I love freedom, and so I have decided to bow

before her as she ordered me to, that all shall see how her beauty has enslaved the brave Loiko Zobar who, until he met her, played with women as a cat plays with mice For this she will become my wife and will kiss and caress me, and I shall lose all desire to sing songs to you and I shall not pine for the loss of my freedom Is that how it is to be, Radda?' He raised his eyes and looked at her grimly She nodded without a word and pointed to the ground in front of her We could not imagine how this had been brought about We even felt an urge to get up and go away so as not to see Loiko Zobar throw himself at the feet of a maid, even though that maid be Radda There was something shameful in it, something very sad

"'Well?' cried Radda to Zobar

"'Do not be in so great a hurry There is plenty of time—time enough to grow tired of me,' laughed Zobar And his laugh had the ring of steel

"'So that is how things are, comrades What is left for me to do? The only thing left for me to do is to see whether my Radda's heart is as strong as she would have us think I shall test it Forgive me'

"And before we had time to guess what he was up to, Radda was lying on the ground with Zobar's curved knife plunged into her breast up to the handle We were dumbstruck

"But Radda pulled out the knife, tossed it aside, held a lock of her black hair to the wound, and smiled as she said in a loud clear voice

"'Farewell, Zobar I knew you would do this' And with that she died

"Do you see what the maid was like, young man? A devilish maid if there ever was one, so help me God

"'Now I shall throw myself at your feet, my proud queen,' said Zobar in a voice that rang out over the steppe And throwing himself on the ground, he pressed his lips to the feet of the dead Radda and lay there without stirring We bared our heads and stood in silence

"What is to be said at a moment like that? Nothing Nur murmured 'Bind the fellow,' but nobody would raise a hand to bind Loiko Zobar, not a soul would do it, and Nur knew this So he turned and walked away Danilo picked up the knife Radda had tossed away and stood staring at it for some time, his grey whiskers twitching, there were still traces of Radda's blood on the blade, which was curved and sharp Then Danilo went over to Zobar and plunged the knife into his back over the heart After all, he was Radda's father, was the old soldier Danilo

"'You've done it,' said Loiko clearly, turning to Danilo, and then he went to join Radda

"We stood looking at them There lay Radda, pressing her hair to her breast with her hand, her wide-open eyes gazing up into the blue sky, while at her feet lay the brave Loiko Zobar His curly hair had fallen over his face, hiding it from us

"For some time we stood there lost in thought Old Danilo's whiskers were quivering and his thick brows were drawn He looked up at the sky and said not a word, but hoary-haired Nur had thrown himself on the ground and his body was shaking with sobs

"And there was good cause to cry, young falcon

"The moral is, let nothing lure you off the path you have taken Keep going straight ahead, then, perhaps, you will not come to a bad end

"And that is the whole story, young falcon "

Makar stopped talking, slipped his pipe into his tobacco pouch, and pulled his coat over his chest A fine rain was falling and the wind was stronger The waves broke with a dull angry rumble One by one the horses came up to our dying fire, gazed at us with big intelligent eyes, then ranged themselves in a ring about us

"Hi, hi!" Makar called to them affectionately, and when he had patted the neck of his favourite black, he turned to me and said "Time to go to sleep " He wrapped himself from head to foot in his *caftan*, stretched out on the ground and lay still

I had no desire to sleep I sat there gazing into the darkness of the steppe, and before my eyes floated the image of Radda, so proud, so imperious, so lovely She was pressing the hand with the hair in it to her breast, and from between the slender dark fingers oozed drops of blood that turned into fiery stars as they struck the ground

And behind her floated the brave figure of Loiko Zobar Locks of curly black hair covered his face, and from under the hair streamed big cold tears

The rain increased and the sea sang a solemn dirge to these two handsome Gypsies—Loiko Zobar and Radda, daughter of the old soldier Danilo

And the two of them whirled round and round, soundlessly, gracefully, in the darkness of the night, and try as he might the handsome Zobar could not overtake the proud Radda

1892

My Travelling Companion

I met him in the harbour of Odessa For three successive days my attention had been drawn by that low-slung, sturdy figure and by that eastern face framed in a handsome beard Ever so often he would crop up before me I would see him standing for hours on end at the granite pier, chewing on the head of his cane and gazing dully over the turgid waters of the harbour with his black, almond-shaped eyes, a dozen times a day he would stroll past me with the air of a man who has not a care in the world Who was he?.. I began to watch him He, for his part, as though on purpose to whet my interest, began to crop up more and more often and, finally, I became accustomed to the sight of his fashionable, light check suit and black hat, his lazy step and dull, bored gaze and began to recognise him from far away He was totally out of place here in the harbour amid the whistling of steamers and engines, the clanking of chains, the shouts of the dockers, the frantic, all-enveloping hustle of the port All the people here were preoccupied, tired, all were bustling, begrimed, sweating, shouting and swearing And through all this busy clamour strolled that strange figure of a man with his deadly-bored face—indifferent to everything, remote and withdrawn

Finally, on the fourth day, I came across him during the lunch break and decided that, come what may, I must find out who he was Settling down not far away from him with a loaf of bread and a water-melon, I began to eat, watching him and wondering what would be the politest way of getting into conversation

He stood leaning against a pile of tea packets and gazing idly round, fingering his cane as though it were a flute.

For me, dressed like a tramp and with a docker's strap on my back, all stained with coal dust, it was difficult to make

the first approach to such a dandy However, to my surprise, I saw that his eyes were fixed upon me and that they were now animated by an unpleasant, greedy, animal flame I decided that the object of my curiosity was hungry and, taking a quick look round, I asked him quietly

"Want something to eat?"

He started, avidly bared something like a hundred close-set, healthy teeth and, like me, glanced suspiciously about him

No one was paying us any attention I handed him half the water-melon and a piece of wheaten bread He seized the lot and disappeared, squatting down behind a pile of crates Sometimes his head would emerge briefly, the hat pushed back and showing his tanned, perspiring forehead His face shone with a wide smile and, for some reason best known to himself, he kept winking at me, without for one second ceasing to chew I made a sign that he should wait for me and went to get some meat, bought it, brought it back, gave it to him and stood by the crates in such a way as to hide him from the eyes of any passers-by Until then he had kept peering round like a beast of prey at his kill, as though he were afraid someone might snatch it away from him, now he began to eat more calmly, yet still so hurriedly and avidly that it became painful for me to watch this desperately hungry man and I turned my back on him

"I tank you! I tank you verry much!" He shook me by the shoulder, then seized my hand, squeezed it and began to shake it painfully

In five minutes' time he was launched on his story

A Georgian, Prince Shakro Ptadze, the only son of his father, a rich landlord from Kutaisi, he had been serving as a clerk on a station of the Transcaucasian railway and living with a friend This friend had suddenly disappeared taking with him all Prince Shakro's money and valuables and so the prince had set out in pursuit. By chance, he heard that his friend had taken a ticket for Batumi, Prince Shakro followed him at once In Batumi, however, it came to light that the friend had gone on to Odessa. Then Prince Shakro

had approached a certain Vano Svanidze, a barber—also a friend, the same age as himself, but not answering to a similar physical description—borrowed his passport, and set off for Odessa Here he informed the police of the theft, they promised to find the thief for him, he waited for two weeks, ate through all his money, and this was now the second day that he had not had a bite to eat

I listened to his story, interspersed with curses, watched him, believed him, and felt sorry for the boy—he was rising twenty and so naive that one might have given him still less Frequently and with profound indignation he referred to the firm friendship which had bound him to the thief who had robbed him of things for which Shakro's stern father would doubtless "cut my throat" with a "dagga" if his son failed to retrieve them I thought that, unless someone helped this lad, the avid city would suck him under I knew what frequently trivial causes sometimes swelled the ranks of the down-and-out, and here Prince Shakro had every opportunity of entering that worthy but hardly respected social group I wanted to help him I suggested to Shakro that we should go to the Chief of Police and ask for a ticket, but he looked embarrassed and told me that he would not go Why? It appeared that he had not paid his landlord for the lodgings he had taken and when asked for the money had struck someone, since then he had been lying low and quite rightly presumed that the police would not thank him for his failure to pay the money or for the blow Come to that, he could not remember for certain whether it was one blow, two, three or four that he had delivered

This complicated the situation I decided that I would keep on at my present job until I had earned enough money to send him back to Batumi, but—alas!—this promised to be too lengthy a process because it transpired that Shakro, having tasted hunger, now ate for three or more

At that time, as a result of an influx of people from famine stricken regions, the daily wage at the harbour was low and between us, out of the eighty kopecks I earned, we spent sixty on food In addition to this, before I met the

prince I had decided to go on to the Crimea and had no desire to stay for long in Odessa So I suggested to Prince Shakro that he and I should go together on foot under the following conditions if I could not find him a travelling companion on to Tiflis I would accompany him myself but, if I did find someone, we would go our separate ways

The prince looked at his smart shoes, his hat, his trousers, stroked his jacket, thought for a while, sighed repeatedly and, finally, gave his consent So it came about that he and I set off together to walk from Odessa to Tiflis

2 By the time we got to Kherson I knew my travelling companion to be a naive, wild youth, extremely unschooled, merry when he was full, miserable when he was hungry, knew him as a powerful, good-natured animal

On the road he told me about the Caucasus, about the way of life of the Georgian landowners, of their entertainments and their attitude to the peasants His tales were interesting, with a weird beauty all their own, but they left me with a most unflattering picture of the teller He told me, for example, the following story

A rich prince's neighbours had gathered at his home for a feast, they drank wine, ate *churek* and *shashlyk*, ate *lavash* bread and rice pilaff, and then the prince invited his guests to the stables The horses were saddled The prince took the best and set him galloping over the grass It was a mettlesome stallion! The guests praised his noble bearing and speed, once more the prince put him into a gallop but, suddenly, a peasant on a white horse came thundering over the turf and passed the prince's horse—passed him and laughed proudly The prince was put to shame before all his guests! His brows twitched sternly together, he summoned the peasant to him with a gesture and, when the man rode up to him, cut off his head with one blow of his sabre and killed his horse with a pistol shot through the ear, then went to the magistrate and informed them of what he had done. He was sentenced to penal servitude

Shakro told me all this in a tone of sympathy for the prince I tried to prove to him that in this case his sympathy was quite wasted, but he rather saw fit to enlighten me

"Princes are few, peasants are many No prince should be condemned for just one peasant Vat is the peasant? Zat " Shakro showed me a clod of earth "But za prince—za prince is like a star!"

We argued, he lost his temper When he lost his temper he used to bare his teeth like a wolf and his whole face would become sharp

"Shut up, Maxim! Never 'ave you lived in za Caucasus!" he would shout at me

My reasoned arguments were powerless against his spontaneity and what seemed clear as daylight to me simply made him laugh Whenever I had him cornered by proofs of the superiority of my opinions he would not stop to reconsider but would say

"You just go on to za Caucasus and try zere to live You see—vat I say is right Everyone acts zat vay, so it must be right. Vy should I be believing you if you alone say zat tings are not so and tousands of people—zat zey are so?"

Then I would give up the argument, realising that only facts, not words could convince a man who believes that life, whatever it be like, is always right and just I would keep quiet and he, quite carried away, smacking his lips, would talk on about life in the Caucasus, full of wild beauty, full of fire and originality. These stories, while they interested and entertained me, would at the same time shock and infuriate me by their cruelty, by their reverence for riches and brute strength Once, I happened to ask him if he knew the teaching of Christ

"Of course!" he answered shrugging his shoulders

On further examination, however, it transpired that what he knew was as follows there had been a person called Christ who rose against the laws of the Jews, and for that the Jews had crucified him on a cross But he was God and so he did not die on the cross but ascended into heaven and then gave people a new law of life

"What kind of a law?" I asked

He looked at me with mocking astonishment and asked

"You are Christian? Vell zen, I too am Christian Almost everybody on Earth is Christian Vell, zen, vy do you ask? You see how everybody lives?—Zat is zee law of Christ "

My blood was up and I began to tell him of the life of Christ To begin with he listened with attention but this gradually slackened off and finally he yawned

Seeing that his heart had no ears for me, I again addressed myself to his mind and began to talk to him of the advantages of mutual assistance, of the advantages of knowledge, of the advantages of keeping on the right side of the law, of advantages and nothing but advantages . But my arguments shattered in fine dust against the stone wall of his understanding of life

"Might zat is right! Za strong man is za law unto himself! 'Ee does not 'ave to study, 'ee finds 'is road blindfold!" Prince Shakro would argue lazily

He always remained true to himself That made me respect him, but he was barbarous, cruel and, every now and again, I felt a sudden surge of hatred for Shakro However, I did not give up hope of finding some point of contact with him, some common ground on which we could meet and begin to understand one another.

We had traversed the Perekop Isthmus and were approaching Yaila I was dreaming of the southern shore of the Crimea, the prince, chanting strange songs through his teeth, was castdown We had got through all our money and so far there had been no opportunities to earn We were aiming for Theodosia where, at that time, work was beginning on the construction of a harbour

The prince informed me that he, too, intended to work and that, when we had earned enough money, we would go on by sea to Batumi In Batumi he had many friends and he would immediately find me a job as a caretaker or watchman He patted me on the shoulder and declared patronisingly with an anticipatory clicking of the tongue

"Such a life I vill organise to you! Tcc, tcc! You vill drink vine—all you vant! Eat mutton—all you vant! Marry viz a Georgian voman, a fat Georgian voman, tcc, tcc, tcc! She vill bake you *lavash*, bear you children, many children, tcc, tcc!"

That "tcc, tcc!" at first surprised, then began to irritate me, and finally reduced me to a state of miserable fury In Russia this particular noise is used to call in the pigs, in the Caucasus, it serves as an expression of enthusiasm, regret, pleasure or sorrow

Shakro's fashionable suit was already very well worn and his shoes were gaping in many places His cane and his hat we had sold back in Kherson In place of the hat he had bought himself the old cap of a railway employee

The first time he had put it on his head—well to one side—he had asked me

"'Ow I look? 'Andsome?"

3 So here we were in the Crimea, Simferopol behind us and heading for Yalta.

I walked in dumb wonder at the natural beauty of this sea-girt corner of earth The prince sighed grievously and, rolling his melancholy gaze over the surrounding countryside, tried to fill his empty stomach with doubtful berries His acquaintanceship with their nutritive properties did not always work out happily for him, and often he would demand of me with angry humour

"And if I turn inside out, 'ow'll I go on after zat? Eh? You tell me—'ow?"

No opportunity for earning anything whatever came our way and we, not having a kopeck to spend on bread, nourished ourselves on fruit and hopes for the future Shakro was already beginning to reproach me with laziness and "seeing gaping", as he put it He was growing generally wearisome but, most of all, he tormented me with tales of his own fabulous appetite It appeared that, having broken his fast at midday with "a leetle lamb" and three bottles of wine, at two o'clock he could without any particular effort

consume a dinner of three plates of some such outlandish concoction as *chokhokhbili* or *chikhirtma*, a bowl of pilaff, a *shampur*[1] of shashlyk, "unleemited kvantities of *tolma*" and many and various other Caucasian dishes with all of which he was used to take wine—"as much as I liked" Day in, day out he would tell me of his gastronomical inclinations and discoveries—smacking his lips, his eyes burning, baring his teeth, grinding them, noisily sucking down and swallowing the hungry saliva which sprayed abundantly from his eloquent lips

Once, near Yalta, I got a job clearing an orchard of pruned branches and, having taken a day's pay in advance, spent the whole half-ruble on bread and meat When I came back with my purchases the gardener called me and I went off, leaving what I had bought with Shakro who had declined to work on the pretext of a headache On my return an hour later I saw that Shakro had not been exaggerating in his tales about his appetite not a crumb remained of all that I had bought It was an uncomradely act, but I said nothing—which, as it transpired later, was my undoing

Shakro, noting my silence, took advantage of it in his own way This was the beginning of an absurd situation I would work and he, having refused, on one pretext or another, whatever job was offered, would eat, sleep and goad me on to further efforts I was half-amused, half-sorry for him—the great healthy tough—when he would rake me hungrily with his eyes, having awaited my return, weary after finishing whatever job I had undertaken, in some shady corner What was still more sad and vexing was that he laughed at me for working He could afford to laugh because he had learned to beg in the name of Christ When he had first begun to collect alms he had been ashamed to do so in front of me but later, when we approached a Tatar village, he would begin his preparations for the collection before my very eyes For this he hobbled along on a stick dragging one leg as though it were paining him, knowing that the canny Tatars would not open their purses to a

healthy lad I argued with him, trying to bring home to him the shame of such an occupation

"I not know 'ow to work!" he refuted me briefly

He did not collect much At the same time, my own health began to fail somewhat Our road became harder from day to day, and my relationship with Shakro more and more strained He now insisted that I should feed him as though by right

"You are my guide! Guide me! 'Ow is it possible I go so far on foot? I am not used It may be I die of it Vy you torment me, keel me? If I die, vat 'appens to all ze uzzers? My muvver, she cries, my farver, 'ee cries, my friends, zey all cry! 'Ow many tears?"

I listened to speeches like these but they did not anger me At that time I had begun to nurse a strange thought which gave me patience to cope with it all Sometimes he would sleep and I, looking searchingly into his calm, expressionless face, would repeat to myself, as though the words held some as yet imperfectly understood revelation for me "My travelling companion mine . my travelling companion "

And, somewhere in the dim recesses of mind, arose the thought that Shakro was indeed only insisting on his right when he made such confident and bold demands on my help and care In these demands there was force of character, there was power He enslaved me and I submitted to him and studied him, watching every flicker of expression, trying to figure out where and at what point he would pull himself up in this process of establishing his dominion over another man He, for his part, felt fine, sang, slept and laughed at me whenever the spirit moved him Sometimes we would separate for two or three days, I would supply him with bread and money and tell him where he should wait for me. When we came together again he, having seen me off with suspicion and angry resentment, would welcome me joyously, triumphantly, and would always say, laughing

"And I think you run avay on your own, leave me all alone! Ha, ha, ha!"

I would give him some food, tell him about the beautiful places I had seen and once, speaking of Bakhchisarai, told him about Pushkin and recited from his poem All this made no impression on him whatsoever

"Oh, verses! Zat is songs, not verses! I knew a man once, a Georgian, 'ee could sing songs! Zey vere real songs! 'Ee would begin to sing—ay, ay, ay! . Loud . verry loud 'ee sang! As if someone vere twisting a dagger about in 'ees gullet! . 'Ee knifed inn-keeper Gone Siberia now "

Every time I returned to him I fell still lower in his estimation, and he could not conceal this from me

Our affairs were going badly I could hardly find opportunities to earn even one-and-a-half rubles a week and, of course, that was very far from sufficient for two Shakro's collections saved us nothing in our expenditure on food His stomach was a small abyss which swallowed everything indiscriminately—grapes, melons, salt fish, bread, dried fruits—and as time went by it seemed to become still more capacious and to require more and more victims

Shakro began to hurry me to leave the Crimea, reasonably confronting me with the fact that it was already autumn and we still had far to go I agreed with him Besides, I had already seen all I wanted of that part of the Crimea, and so we went on towards Theodosia in the hopes of "raking in" some "cash", of which we were now quite devoid

Having walked about twenty versts on from Alushta, we halted for the night I had persuaded Shakro to walk along the coast, although it was a much longer route, but I wanted to breathe the sea air We lit a fire and lay down beside it It was a glorious evening The dark green sea broke on the rocks down below us, the pale blue sky kept a solemn silence above, and all around the trees and bushes were rustling quietly The moon was rising Shadows fell from the lacy green of the plane-trees A bird was singing boldly, melodiously Its silver trills melted in the air alive with the gentle, caressing sound of the waves and, when they faded,

the nervous chirping of some insect at once became audible The fire blazed merrily and its flame seemed a great flaring bouquet of red and yellow flowers These too, cast their own shadows and these shadows leapt around as merrily as though they were showing off their vivacity to the lazy shadows of the moon The whole expanse of the sea's horizon was deserted, the sky above it cloudless, and I felt as though I were sitting on the edge of the earth contemplating empty space—that most enchanting of mysteries A timorous feeling of being on the verge of something inexpressibly vast filled my soul, and my very heart beats were hushed in awe

Suddenly, Shakro burst out into a loud guffaw

"Ha, ha, ha Vat a stoopid face you 'ave on! Ex-ectly like zee sheep! Aha, ha, ha! "

I was as startled as though a clap of thunder had suddenly resounded right over my head But it was worse than that It was funny, yes, but—how it hurt my feelings! He, Shakro, was crying with laughter, I was on the verge of tears for quite a different reason There was a great lump in my throat, I was speechless and could only stare at him with popping eyes which, of course, made him laugh all the more He rolled about on the ground holding his stomach, I still could not get over the insult I had suffered a very real injury and those few who, I hope, will understand what I was going through—because they themselves, perhaps, have experienced something of the same sort—will be able to perceive its full enormity

"Stop it!" I yelled at him, furiously

He jumped with fright but still could not pull himself together and paroxisms of laughter continued to overwhelm him, he puffed out his cheeks, his eyes bulging and then suddenly collapsed in a fresh bellow of laughter Then I got up and walked away from him I walked for a long time, without a thought in my head, almost without awareness of any kind, brimming with the burning poison of my injury I had opened my heart to embrace the whole of Nature and silently, with all my soul, I had been telling Her how I loved

Her with the ardent love of a man who has something of the poet in him, and Nature, in the person of Shakro, had burst out laughing at me for my moment of self-surrender! I would have gone far in compiling a deed of accusation against Nature, Shakro and life in general, had not swift steps sounded behind me

"Be not angry!" Shakro pronounced shyly, gently touching my shoulder "You vere saying prayers? I did not know "

He spoke in the timid tone of a guilty little boy and, in spite of my emotional state, I could not help seeing his pathetic face, comically distorted by shame and fear

"I vill never 'urt you again Truly! Never!"

He shook his head vehemently

"I see—you are 'umble You work Don't make me to work, I vonder—Vy? Must be—because 'ee's stoopid, like zee sheep "

So there he was comforting me! There was he apologising to me! Of course, after such comfort and such apologies there was nothing left for me to do but to forgive him not only for the past, but for all that was yet to come

Half an hour later he was already sound asleep and I was sitting beside him, looking at him In sleep even a strong man appears weak and defenceless—Shakro was pitiable The puffy lips and arched brows gave his face a childish look of shy surprise He breathed evenly, calmly, but sometimes he would begin to toss and talk in his sleep, speaking rapidly on a note of entreaty in Georgian Around us reigned that tense silence which invariably awakes a feeling of expectation and which, if it went on for long enough, would send a man crazy by the absolute quality of the stillness and the absence of all sound, that vivid shadow of movement The quiet whispering of the waves did not reach us—we were in a kind of pit overgrown with clinging bushes and resembling the gaping ragged jaws of some petrified beast I looked at Shakro and thought

"He is my travelling companion - I could leave him here, but I shall never get away from him, for his name is

legion He is my travelling companion for all my life He will walk beside me to the edge of the grave "

Theodosia did not come up to our expectations When we arrived, there were some four hundred others who, like us, had hoped to find work and who had had to be satisfied with the part of spectators of the building of the pier The workmen on the job were Turks, Greeks, Georgians, Russians from Smolensk and Ukrainians from Poltava Everywhere in the town and its outskirts there wandered in groups the grey, depressed figures of the "famine-ridden", and tramps from the Crimea and the Sea of Azov moved amongst them with a wolf-like lope

We went on to Kerch

My travelling companion kept his word and gave up bating me, but he was very hungry and gnashed his teeth like a wolf when he saw anyone eating, and horrified me by his descriptions of the amount of various foods which he would gladly have swallowed For some time now he had begun to recall women First in passing—with sighs of regret, then more frequently, with the gloating smiles of "a man of zee East", and then, finally, had let himself go to such a degree that he could not let a single female pass by, whatever her age or appearance, without sharing with me some lascivious practical or philosophical comment on one or other of her points He spoke of women so freely, with such knowledge of the subject, and looked at them from such an astonishingly single-minded point of view, that it made me feel like washing my mouth out Once I tried to prove to him that women were in no way his inferiors but, seeing that not only was he thoroughly offended at me for my opinions, but was even prepared to lose his temper over the humiliation to which, in his view, I was subjecting him, I decided to leave off these attempts until he was better fed

We headed for Kerch not round the coast but across the steppe in order to shorten the road, for we had nothing in our pack but one oat-cake weighing about three pounds which we had bought from a Tatar for our last five kopecks. Shakro's efforts to beg bread in the villages led to nothing

Everywhere people answered briefly "Can't feed you all!" This was nothing but the truth in that difficult year there really were an appalling number of people searching for a bite of bread

My travelling companion could not abide the famine refugees—rivals in the collection of alms His vital reserves, in spite of the hard road and poor nourishment, would not permit of his acquiring such a drained and pathetic appearance about which they could boast as of a kind of perfection and, seeing them coming from afar, he would say

"Again zey come! Phoo, phoo, phoo! Vy do zey come? Vy do zey travel about? Is zere in all Russia so little place? I do not understand! Verry stoopid people, zee Russians "

When I explained the causes which sent the stupid Russian people wandering across the Crimea in search of bread, he would shake his head unbelievingly and reply

"Don't understand! 'Ow eez it possible! In Georgia vee do not 'ave such foolishnesses!"

We arrived in Kerch late in the evening and had to spend the night on the shore under the scaffolding of the quay It was better that we should remain in hiding We knew that, not long before our arrival, all the superfluous inhabitants had been deported from Kerch and, as tramps, we were afraid of getting mixed up with the police, moreover, as Shakro was travelling on somebody else's passport, this could have led to serious complications in our careers

The waves at high tide sprayed us generously with foam, at dawn we crept out from the scaffolding damp and chilled All day me wandered about the wharves and all that we managed to earn was one small coin slipped me by a priest's wife for carrying a bag of melons from the market

It was necessary to cross the bay to Taman! Not one boatman would agree to take us across as oarsmen, however much I implored them to do so All were prejudiced against the tramps who, not long before our arrival, had earned themselves all too great a reputation in these parts and, not without reason, they classed us among them

When evening fell, angry at our lack of luck and at the world in general, I made up my mind to a somewhat risky undertaking and, with the onset of night, I proceeded to put in into execution

4 That night, Shakro and I quietly approached the customs post near which three sloops were moored by chains to iron rings screwed into the stone wall of the embankment It was dark, there was a wind blowing, the sloops bumped against one another and the chains were clanking It was easy for me to loosen one of the rings and pull it out of the stone

Some ten feet above our head the excise sentry walked up and down whistling between his teeth When he halted anywhere close to us I would stop working, but this was a superfluous precaution, he could not be expected to suspect the presence of a man below him sitting up to his neck in water Besides, the chains kept up a continuous clanking without any help from me Shakro was already stretched out in the bottom of the boat and whispering something at me, the sense of which I could not catch because of the noise of the waves The ring gave way in my hands A wave took the boat and carried it away from the bank I held the chain and swam alongside it, then clambered on board We took up two of the planks from the floor of the boat and, fixing them into the rollocks in place of oars, we rowed away

The waves were in a lively mood and Shakro, sitting at the tiller, now disappeared from my gaze altogether, now rose high above me, and, with a loud cry, almost came falling down on top of me I advised him not to cry out if he did not want to be heard by the sentry Then he fell silent I saw his face as a white blur He held the tiller all the way We had no time to exchange places and we were frightened to move about in the boat I called out to him what course to set and he, understanding what I wanted at once, did everything as deftly as a born sailor The planks acting for oars were of little help to me The wind was behind us and I did not pay any particular attention to where we were drifting but just

tried to keep the prow pointing towards the opposite bank It was easy to guess where this was because we could still see the lights of Kerch The waves peered in at us over the sides of the boat and muttered angrily, the further we drifted out into the bay the higher they rose In the distance there sounded the roaring of water, wild and full of menace And the boat drifted on—quicker and quicker It was becoming very difficult to keep on course Now we slithered down to the bottom of deep pits, now we were tossed up to the summit of great hills of water, and the night grew darker and darker, the clouds coming ever lower The lights at our stern disappeared in the darkness and then things became really frightening It seemed as though there were no limit to this expanse of angry water There was nothing to be seen but the waves flying towards us out of the darkness They knocked one plank out of my hand and I myself threw the other onto the floor of the boat and held onto the sides firmly with both hands Shakro emitted a wild yell every time the boat leapt upwards I felt weak and helpless in this darkness, surrounded by the wrathful element and deafened by its noise Without hope, a prey to bitter despair, I saw nothing but those waves with their whitish crests breaking in salty spray, and the clouds above me, dense, ragged, were themselves like waves I understood one thing only everything that was going on around me was in potential immeasurably more furious and more terrible, and I was somehow offended that it seemed to be holding back and did not wish to show its full power Death was inevitable But it was essential that its impartial, all-levelling sway should be somehow aestheticised, made more acceptable—it was so coarsely matter-of-fact, so hard to accept If I were given the choice between burning in flames or drowning in a quagmire, I should do my best to choose the former—it is somehow a more worthy ending

"Let us 'oist a sail!" shouted Shakro
"Where are you going to get a sail from?" I asked

"Out of my coat "

"Throw it here! Don't let go the tiller!

Shakro began a silent struggle in the bows

"'Old it!"

He threw me his coat Crawling painfully along the bottom of the boat, I tore another plank from the floor, pushed it through the sleeve of the rough garment, propped it against the seat, braced my legs and had just caught hold of the other sleeve and a part of the hem when something quite unexpected happened . The boat leapt particularly high,then shot downwards and I found myself in the water, holding the coat in one hand and grasping the rope looped round the outside of the boat with the other The waves broke noisily over my head and I was swallowing the bitter, salt water It had filled my ears, mouth, nose Clinging firmly to the rope, I bobbed up and down in the water, bumping my head against the side of the boat and, flinging the coat back over the bottom of the overturned boat, struggled to heave myself back on after it One of a dozen or so efforts was successful, I straddled the boat and immediately caught sight of Shakro who was somersaulting about in the water, both hands grasping the very rope which I had just released It appeared that it passed round the whole boat, threaded through the iron rings on the sides

"Alive!" I shouted at him

He jumped high out of the water and flopped down across the bottom of the boat I reached out to help him up and for a moment we were face to face with one another I was sitting astride the boat as though it were a horse, my feet thrust into the tow-ropes as into stirrups—but the pose was insecure any wave might have knocked me out of the saddle Shakro was gripping my knees with his hands and had buried his face in my chest He was trembling from head to foot and I could hear his teeth chattering Something had to be done The bottom of the boat was as slippery as though it had been oiled I told Shakro that he must lower himself back into the water, holding onto the rope on one side, and that I would do the same on the other

Instead of answering he began butting his head into my chest Every now and again the wild dance of the waves would send them leaping over us and we could hardly maintain our hold, the rope was cutting terribly into one of my legs Throughout my field of vision great hills of water were heaving into being and vanishing noisily

I repeated what I had just said in the tone of an order Shakro began to butt his head into my chest still more violently There was no time to lose I tore his hands loose from me one after the other and began to push him into the water, trying to make him catch the rope And then something happened which frightened me more than anything else which had taken place that night

"You vant to drown me?" whispered Shakro, and looked into my face

That really was terrifying! The question itself was terrifying, still more so the tone of the question in which there sounded a meek submission, and a plea for mercy, and the last sigh of a man who had lost all hope of escaping a fatal issue But most terrifying of all were the eyes in the deathly-pale, wet face! .

I yelled at him "Hold on!" and lowered myself into the water, holding the rope My leg struck against something and at first I could understand nothing for the pain of it. But then I did understand Something hot surged up within me I became intoxicated and felt myself strong as never before .

"Land!" I yelled

Possibly great seafarers on the discovery of new lands shouted this word with more feeling than I, but I doubt that they shouted it any louder Shakro let out a whoop and cast himself into the water But soon we had both sobered the water was still up to our chests and no more solid signs of dry land were anywhere to be seen Fortunately, I had not let go of the boat And so Shakro and I took up our positions one on each side of it and, holding onto the saving ropes, cautiously proceeded in an unknown direction, leading the boat behind us.

Shakro was muttering something and laughing I was looking anxiously about me It was pitch-dark Behind and to the right of us the sound of the waves was louder, ahead and to the left—softer, we set off to the left The bottom was firm, sandy, but full of sudden pitfalls, sometimes we could not touch bottom and had to paddle with our legs and one arm, holding onto the boat with the other, at others the water was only up to our knees In the deep places Shakro howled and I trembled with fright. Then, suddenly—we were saved! Ahead of us a light was visible

Shakro began to yell for all he was worth, but I very well remembered that the boat was state property and lost no time in reminding him of this He fell silent, but in a minute or two he began to sob I could not comfort him—there was no comfort

The water grew shallower . up to the knees the ankles Still we dragged the government boat, but there came a moment when we no longer had the strength and we let it go A kind of black, withered tree trunk lay across our way We jumped over it and both of us landed barefooted on some kind of prickly grass It was painful and, on the part of the earth, scarcely hospitable, but we took no notice of that and set out at a run towards the light It was about a mile away and, flaming merrily, seemed to be laughing as it moved towards us

5. Three enormous, shaggy dogs, leaping out of somewhere in the darkness, flung themselves upon us. Shakro, who had been sobbing fitfully all the time, emitted a howl and fell flat upon the ground I threw the wet coat at the oncoming dogs and bent down, feeling with my hand for a stone or a stick There was nothing, only the grass pricked my hand The dogs made a concerted attack I whistled for all I was worth, thrusting two fingers into my mouth They jumped back and immediately we heard the tramping feet and raised voices of running men

A few minutes later we were at the fire in a circle of four shepherds clad in sheepskins, the wool outermost

Two sat on the ground smoking, one, a tall man with a thick black beard in a tall fur hat such as are worn by Cossacks, stood behind us leaning on a staff with an enormous knot of root at the end, the fourth, a sandy-headed youngster, was helping the weeping Shakro to undress About five yards outside the circle the earth was covered by a thick layer of something grey and billowy, resembling spring snow which has just begun to thaw Only after looking carefully for some time was it possible to distinguish the separate forms of sheep, closely huddled together There must have been several thousand there, compressed by sleep and the darkness of the night into a dense, warm, thick strata of the steppe From time to time they would bleat, plaintively and nervously

I dried the coat and told the shepherds everything as it had really happened, and told them also how I had come by the boat

"Where is it, that boat?" asked the stern grey-headed old man, who had never taken his eyes off me as I spoke

I told him

"Go, Mikhail Take a look!"

Mikhail—the one with the black beard, shouldered his staff and set out for the shore

Shakro, trembling with cold, asked me to give him the warm but still wet coat, but the old man said

"Wait! Run about a little first to warm your blood Run round the fire, up with you!"

Shakro did not immediately understand but then he suddenly jumped up and, naked, began to dance a wild dance, flying like a ball over the fire, twirling around on one spot, stamping his legs on the ground, yelling at the top of his voice, waving his arms It was a killing sight Two of the shepherds were rolling about on the ground, laughing for all they were worth, while the old man, his face unmoved and serious, tried to clap out the rhythm of the dance but could not catch it and, his eyes glued to Shakro's gyrations, kept shaking his head, twitching his moustache and crying out in a deep bass voice

"Hai-ha! So-so! Hai-ha! Butz-butz!"

Illumined by the light of the fire, Shakro writhed like a snake, now hopping on one foot, now tapping rhythmically with both, and his body, gleaming in the light of the fire, covered with great drops of sweat which appeared red as blood

Now all three shepherds were clapping and I, trembling with cold, was drying myself at the fire and thinking that today's adventure should have been sheer joy for a lover of Fenimore Cooper or Jules Verne shipwreck, hospitable aborigenes and barbarous dancing around a camp-fire

Now Shakro was already sitting on the ground huddled up in his coat and eating something, glancing up at me with black eyes which held a sparkle I did not quite like His clothing was drying out hung on sticks thrust into the earth close to the fire I was also given some bread and salted lard

Mikhail returned and sat down beside the old man without a word

"Well?" asked the old man

"The boat's there!" answered Mikhail briefly

"It won't wash away?"

"No!"

And they all fell silent, staring at me

"Well," asked Mikhail, not addressing anybody in particular, "should we take them to the Ataman[2] in the village? Or maybe—straight to the excisemen?"

No one answered Shakro ate unconcernedly.

"We could take them to the Ataman . or to the excisemen for that matter . One's as good as t'other . "

"Wait a bit, grandad " I began.

But he took absolutely no notice of me

"So that's the way it is! Mikhail! The boat's there?"

"Uhu, it's there "

"So—and the water won't wash it away?"

"No, it won't "

"Then, let it stay there and tomorrow the boatmen'll go over to Kerch an' they can take it with them Why shouldn't they take an empty boat along with them? Eh? So that's

that And now you you raggety lads did you . how should I put it, now? Did you get a fright, the pair of you? No? Tee-hee! But another half-a-verst and you'ld 've been out in the open sea What'ld you've done then, if you'd 'a been thrown out into the sea? Ah? You'ld 've gone to the bottom, like stones, the both of you Drowned you'ld 've been! And no more to it "

The old man fell silent and looked at me with a sarcastic smile lurking in his moustaches

"Well, nothing to say for yourself, laddie?"

I was fed up with his deliberations, the drift of which I had failed to grasp and had taken as a form of mockery

"I'm listening to you!" I said, somewhat edgily

"Well, and what do you make of it?" the old man wanted to know

"Neither head nor tail "

"Now then, now then, what're you showing yer teeth for? Think it's all in order to snap and snarl at yer elders and betters, do you?"

I said nothing

"Don't you want any more to eat, now?" continued the old man

"No "

"Well, don't then Nobody's forcing you But perhaps you might take a bit of bread for the road, like?"

I started with joy but did not give myself away

"For the road, I might. " I said calmly

"Ehey! Give 'em some bread for the road and some of that there lard And maybe there's something else there, too? If there is, let them have it "

"Are we letting 'em go then?" asked Mikhail

The other two raised their eyes to the old man

"Well, and what'ld they find to do here with us?"

"But we thought we might take them to the Ataman or if not—to the excisemen," remarked Mikhail in a disappointed voice

Shakro stirred in his place near the fire and inquisitively poked his head from out of the coat He was undismayed

"What'ld they find to do with the Ataman? There's nothing there for them, as I reckon They can go and see him later If they want "

"What about the boat then?" insisted Mikhail

"The boat?" The old man batted question for question "What about the boat? Is it there?"

"It is," replied Mikhail

"Well, let it stay there, *then* And in the morning Ivashka can take it to the moorings And from there someone'll take it over to Kerch There's nothing else we *can* do with the boat "

I watched the old shepherd intently and could not detect the least *movement* in his phlegmatic, sunburnt and weathered face, over which the shadows of the fire were leaping

"As long as no ill comes of it unexpected-like later on " Mikhail began to give way

"If you don't let your tongues run away with you, I don't see why ill should come of it And if we take them to the Ataman, it's my opinion that it'll mean trouble for us and them What we want's to attend to our own business and what they want is—to walk Eh! Have you far left to walk?" asked the old man, although I had already told him how far

"To Tiflis "

"A long road! There you see, and the Ataman'll delay them, and if he delays them, when'll they arrive? Better let 'em keep going to where they want to get to Ah?"

"Why not, then? Let 'em go on!" the old man's comrades agreed when, having concluded his slow remarks, he tightly compressed his lips and looked round at them all questioningly, fingering his grey-black beard

"Well, God go with you, lads!" The old man made a gesture of dismissal "And the boat we'll send back where it belongs All right?"

"Thank you, grandfather!" I took off my cap

"What are you thanking me for?"

"Thank you, brother, thank you!" I repeated, very moved

"What are you thanking me for? Here's a queer thing! I say—God go with you, and he says—thank you! You weren't afraid I'd send you to the devil, were you? Eh?"

"Guilty—I was!" I admitted

"Oh! " And the old man raised his brows "Now why should I send a man on that bad road? Better send him the way I'd rather be treading myself Who knows we may meet again, and then . we'll be old acquaintances, like We all need a bit of help at one time or another 'Bye, now! "

He pulled off his shaggy sheepskin cap and bowed to us. His comrades bowed too We asked them the way to Anapa and set out

Shakro was laughing at something

6 "What are you laughing at?" I asked him

I was delighted with the old shepherd and his philosophy of life, I was delighted with the fresh wind blowing up before the dawn straight into our faces and because the sky was cloudless, because soon the sun would rise in a clear sky and the brilliant, handsome god of a new day would be born .

Shakro winked at me cunningly and burst out laughing even louder I smiled, too, hearing his healthy, merry laughter All that was left of our exhausting journey after two or three hours at the shepherds' fire and the tasty bread and lard was a slight aching in our bones, but this sensation did not mar our good spirits

"Well, what are you laughing at? Glad to have come out of it alive, are you? Alive, and with a full stomach into the bargain?"

Shakro shook his head, nudged me vigorously with his elbow, pulled a face, burst out laughing again and eventually spoke out in his execrable Russian

"You not understand, vy it is funny? No? I vill tell you! You know vat I do if zey 'ad taken us to zat Ataman-exciseman? You don' know? I tell on you 'ee vanted to drown me! And I begin to cry Zen zey are sorry for me and do not put me in prison! Understand?"

To begin with I wanted to take this as a joke —but—alas!—he was able to persuade me that his intention had been perfectly serious He persuaded me of this so clearly and convincingly that, instead of losing my temper with him for his naive cynicism, I was filled with a feeling of profound pity for him What else is it possible to feel for a man who, with the brightest of smiles and in the most sincere tones, informs you of his intention to kill you? What was there to be done about him, if he looked on this act as an endearing witty joke?

I hotly began to prove to Shakro all the immorality of his intention He replied very simply that I do not understand his true interests and forget that he is living with a false passport and that for that no one was going to pat him on the back ..

Suddenly, I was struck by a cruel thought ..

"Wait a moment," I said, "do you mean to say you believe that I really did want to drown you?"

"No! Ven you push me into ze vatter, zen I believe, ven you vent in yourself—I stopped "

"Thank God for that!" I cried out "Well, I suppose I must say thank you!"

"No, do not say tank you! I say you tank you Back there, at ze fire, you were cold, I was cold too Ze coat was yours—but you did not take eet You dried eet, gave eet me And for yourself—you took nutting So I say tank you! You are very good man—I understand Ven vee come to Tiflis—you vill be paid back for everything I vill take you to my farver Say to my farver—'ere is ze man! Give 'im to eat, give 'im to drink, and me—to zee donkeys in zeir stables! Zat is vat I shall say! You vill leeve with us, you vill be a gardener, vill drink vine, eat all you vant! Akh, akh, akh! . A vonderful life you vill 'ave! Very simple! Eat from ze same dish, I vill say, drink from ze same cup as I! "

He launched into a long and detailed description of the delights of the life he intended to arrange for me in Tiflis And to the sound of his talking I thought of the great misery of those people who, armed by a new morality, by new

aspirations, have outstripped their contemporaries and are forced to travel in the company of those who are alien to them, incapable of understanding them . Life is hard for these lonely people! They are above the earth, in the air . But they hover there like seeds of good corn, however seldom they may fall in fruitful soil .

It was growing light. Near the horizon, the sea was already sparkling with pinkish gold

"I vant sleep!" said Shakro

We halted He lay down in a hollow formed by the wind in the dry sand near the shore and, covering himself from head to heels in the big coat, soon went to sleep I sat beside him and watched the sea

It was living a life of its own, full and free, animated by powerful movement Herd upon herd of waves rolled noisily up onto the shore and broke over the sand which hissed quietly as it absorbed the water Tossing their white manes, the leading waves flung themselves noisily in a frontal attack along the shore and slithered back defeated, only to be met by others, coming up in support Locked in a firm embrace, all foaming and frothing, they rolled up the shore again and beat upon it in an effort to extend the borders of their being From the horizon to the shore, over all the expanse of the sea, rose these strong and supple waves and kept rolling in, on and on, massed together and bound one to another by a common purpose The sun illumined their crests more and more brightly and those of the distant waves on the horizon appeared blood-red Not one drop was wasted or lost without trace in that titanic movement of massed water which seemed as though animated by a conscious purpose which it was on the point of achieving by these wide and rhythmical blows It was fascinating to watch the challenging courage of the leaders dashing themselves bravely against the silent shore, and it was grand to watch how, calmly and solidly behind them, followed the whole sea, the mighty sea, already dyed by the sun in all the colours of the rainbow and fully aware of its own beauty and strength

Cutting through the waves, a great steamer sailed out from behind the promontory, rocking stately on the heaving bosom of the sea, riding the crests of the great waves which flung themselves angrily against its sides Beautiful and powerful, its metal shining in the sun, it might at any other time have called to mind the proud works of man who can impose his will upon the elements But at my side lay sleeping a man who was himself the element

7 We walked on through the Terek district Shakro was torn and ragged to an almost unbelievable degree and was awfully ill-tempered, even though he no longer went hungry as there were now plenty of opportunities for earning He had shown himself to be quite unadapted for any form of work Once he did try forking the straw discarded by the threshing machine but he laid off at midday, having rubbed bleeding blisters on the palms of his hands Another time we tried weeding and he grazed the skin off his neck with a hoe

Our progress was fairly slow—two days working to one day on the road Shakro ate without any self-control and, because of his greed, I could not save enough money to buy him so much as a part of a new outfit of clothing, whereas all the remaining parts were a countless mass of variegated holes held together by ill-stitched, multicoloured patches.

Once, in some village or other, he found and removed from my pack five rubles which, with great difficulty and in secret from him, I had managed to save, and appeared that evening in the house where I was working in the kitchen garden, drunk and in the company of a fat Cossack woman who hailed me with the greeting

"Good on you, damned heretic!"

And when, startled by this appellation, I asked her why I was to be accounted a heretic, she replied with aplomb

"Because, you devil you, you forbid the poor lad to make love to women! How can you forbid what the law allows? Anathema, that's what you are! "

Shakro stood beside her and nodded agreement. He was very drunk, and the least movement set him rocking as though he were coming unscrewed at the joints. His lower lip was pendulous. His dull eyes seemed to be trying to outstare me with empty persistence.

"Now then, you, what are you gaping at us like that for? Hand over his money!" shouted the woman, very daringly.

"What money?" I asked, amazed.

"Come on, come on! Or I'll have you to the courthouse. Hand over that hundred and fifty rubles you took from him in Odessa!"

What was I to do? That damned woman in her drunken state might well have gone to the courthouse and then the village administration, hard on all kinds of vagrants, would have arrested us. Who knows what the consequences of such an arrest might have been for me and Shakro! So I began to use diplomatic means to get round the woman, which did not cost me any great effort. Somehow or other, with the help of three bottles of wine, I managed to placate her. She collapsed on the ground amongst the water-melons and went to sleep. I put Shakro to bed and early in the morning of the following day he and I quit the village, leaving the woman amongst the water-melons.

Half sick from the hangover, his face all crushed and swollen, Shakro kept on spitting and heaving great sighs. I tried to talk to him but he did not answer and only shook his shaggy head like a sheep.

We were following a narrow footpath along which little red snakes were crawling back and forth, slithering about under our feet. The stillness which reigned all around was conducive to drowsy day-dreaming. Black flocks of clouds were moving slowly up the sky behind us. Merging together they covered the whole of the sky behind us when before us all was clear, although tatters of clouds had torn away from the main body and were blowing merrily on ahead, overtaking us. Somewhere in the distance there was a grumble of thunder and its growling roars were coming

nearer and nearer Drops of rain were falling The grass was rustling like tin-foil

There was no shelter It was dark now and the rustle of the grass sounded louder, more fearful There was a clap of thunder—and the clouds shuddered, flaming with blue light. Heavy rain came streaming down, and one after another the claps of thunder kept up a perpetual roaring over the deserted steppe The grass, bent by gusts of wind and rain, lay flat along the earth Everything was trembling, nervously aware The lightning tore the clouds in blinding flashes In its brilliant, blue light loomed a distant range of mountains, glittering with blue flames, silver and cold, then, when the lightning went out, it disappeared as though swallowed up by the abyss of the dark All around was a roaring, trembling, echoing womb of sounds It was as though the sky, turgid and angry, was undergoing a process of purification by fire from all the dust and filth emanating from the earth, and the earth, it seemed, was trembling in fear of its wrath

Shakro was whimpering like a frightened dog As for me, I was seized with a kind of gaiety, swept up above the everyday world by the contemplation of this mighty, sombre panorama of a storm over the steppe Divine chaos carried me away and induced a heroic mood, enveloping the soul in stormy harmony

I was overcome by the desire to participate in the storm, to find some outlet for the overflowing awe and wonder touched off in me by its power The blue fire which had set the whole sky aflame, was, it seemed, alight in my own breast, and—well, how was I to express my vast excitement and my rapture? I began to sing—loudly, with all my might. The thunder roared, the lightning flashed, the grass rustled and I sang and felt myself utterly at one with all the other sounds . I was beside myself, it cannot be held against me, for I was doing no harm to anyone but myself Storm at sea, thunder over the steppe! I know no more grandiose manifestations of nature

And so I shouted aloud, in the firm conviction that I would not be disturbing anyone by such conduct and that I was running no risk of having my actions subjected to criticism Suddenly, however, my legs were jerked sharply from under me and, involuntarily, I sat down in a puddle

Shakro was looking into my face with serious and angry eyes

"You are out of your senses? You are not? No? Zen—shu-ut up! Not to screech! I tear your troat open! Understand?"

I was amazed and began by asking him in what way I had disturbed him

"You frighten me! Understand? Ze tunder—zat is God speaking, an' you shout 'im down Vat you tink?"

I told him that I had a perfect right to sing if I wanted to, just as he had

"But I do not vant," he declared categorically

"Then don't!" I conceded

"And you don't neither!" Shakro exhorted me severely

"No, I feel like singing ."

"Now listen—vat you tink?" Shakro began on a note of fury "'Oo are you? 'Ave you a 'ouse? 'Ave you a muvver? Farver? 'Ave you any relations? Land? 'Oo are you in zis vorld? You are a man, you tink? It is I—zee man! I 'ave everything!" He slapped his chest "I am prince! And you you—are nutting! Nutting at all! I am known in Kutaisi, in Tiflis! Understand? You no go against me! You serve me?—You vill be content! I pay you ten times over! You do zis for me? You cannot do any uzzer, you say yourself zat God commanded to serve all men witout revard! I revard you! Vy-for do you torment me? Preach at me, frighten me? You vant, I become like you? Zat is not good! Ugh, ugh, ugh! . Tphoe! tphoe! ."

He talked, smacked his lips, spat, snorted, sighed I looked into his face, my mouth open with astonishment He was evidently pouring forth all the accumulated outrages, injuries and humiliations he had suffered at my hands since the beginning of our journey To lend weight to his

arguments, he kept poking his finger into my chest and shaking me by the shoulder and, at particularly powerful moments, pressed his whole great carcass down on me The rain poured down upon us, incessant peals of thunder broke over our heads and Shakro, in order to make himself heard, was shouting at the top of his voice

The absurdity of my position was what struck me most and made me burst out laughing to split my sides

Shakro, spitting expressively, turned away from me

8

The nearer we came to Tiflis, the more thoughtful and gloomy did Shakro become Something-new appeared in his emaciated but still impassive face Not far from Vladikavkaz we came to a Circassian village and hired ourselves out there to harvest sweet-corn

After two days working with the Circassians who hardly spoke any Russian and spent their time laughing at us and cursing us in their own language, we decided to leave the village, unnerved by the increasingly hostile attitude of its inhabitants Some ten versts on from the village, Shakro suddenly pulled out from under his shirt a length of Le?ghin chiffon and showed it to me in triumph, announcing

"No more need to work! Vee sell—buy all vee need! It vill take us until Tiflis! Understand?"

Graded to the point of fury, I snatched the material from him and threw it aside, glancing over my shoulder Circassians are not to be trifled with Not long before we had heard the following story from some Cossacks one tramp on leaving the village where he had been working, had taken with him an iron spoon The Circassians overtook him, found the spoon and, slitting open his stomach with a dagger, pushed the spoon deep into the wound and then rode calmly off leaving him out in the steppe where the Cossacks picked him up as a dying man He told them the story and died on the way to their village The Cossacks had warned us sternly against the Circassians more than once,

telling us other stories which painted a similar moral—and I saw no reason to disbelieve them

I reminded Shakro of this He stood before me listening and suddenly, without a word, baring his teeth and narrowing his eyes, he sprang at me like a cat For about five minutes we had a thorough free for all, till finally Shakro shouted angrily

"Enough!"

Exhausted, we sat opposite one another in silence for some time Shakro looked wistfully in the direction that I had thrown the stolen chiffon and launched into speech

"Vy vee fight? Pa, pa, pa! Very stoopid Did I steal from you? You sorry to see I 'ave ze cloth? I sorry for you, zat is vy I steal You are ze one 'oo must work, I am not able Vat am I to do? I vanted to 'elp you "

I tried to explain to him the meaning of theft

"Please, shu-ut up! You 'ave 'ead like the wood " He was contemptuous of me and explained "If you are dying—vill you steal zen? Vell! And do you call zis life? Shut up!"

Afraid of angering him again, I said nothing This was the second case of theft Before, when we had been on the Black Sea, he had taken some pocket scales from a Greek fisherman Then, too, we had almost come to blows

"Vell—vee go on?" he asked, when we had calmed down, made things up and rested

We went on With every passing day his mood grew blacker and he looked at me strangely from under knitted brows Once, when we had already crossed the Daryal ravine and were descending the Gudaur, he began

"In a day or two—vee come to Teeflees Tcc, tcc!" He clicked his tongue and beamed expansively "I come 'ome vere 'ave you been? I 'ave been travelling! I go to zee steam bath aha! I vill eat much ah, much! I say to my muvver—I much vant to eat! I vill say to my farver—forgive me! I'ave seen much sorrow, I'ave seen life—all kinds! Tramps are very good people Eef I meet one, I give 'im a ruble, take 'im to zee inn, say drink vine I'ave been a tramp!

I vill tell my farver .. Zat man—'ee vas as an elder bruvver to me . 'Ee preach at me 'Ee beat me, ze dog! 'Ee feed me Now, I vill say, you feed 'im for zat Feed 'im for a year! For a year—as long as zat You 'ear, Maxim?"

I liked to listen when he spoke in this way, in such moments there was something simple, childlike about him Such speeches were also of interest to me because I knew no one in Tiflis and winter was setting in—on the Gudaur we had already met with snow To some extent, I was counting on Shakro

We walked quickly We came to Mtskheta, the ancient capital of Iberia. The following day we planned to reach Tiflis

From afar, about five versts distant, I set eyes upon the capital of Caucasia, wedged between two mountains The end of the road! I was happy about something, Shakro—indifferent. With dull eyes he looked out ahead and spat hungry saliva, every now and again clasping at his stomach with a grimace of pain He had risked eating raw carrot pulled by the wayside

"You sink zat I—a Georgian nobleman—vill enter my city in daylight so, all ragged, dirty? Oh, no, no!—Vee vait until evening 'Alt!"

We sat down by the wall of some empty building and, each rolling a last cigarette, shivering with cold, began to smoke A bitter, strong wind was blowing down from the Georgian Military Highway Shakro sat humming a sad song I thought of a warm room and of all the other advantages of a settled life over a vagrant existence.

"We go!" Shakro rose with the face of one who has made up his mind

Darkness was falling It was lighting-up time in the town It was beautiful gradually, one after another, the lights shone out in the gloom which had filled the valley and hidden the town

"'Ere, you give me zat *bashlyk*[3] to 'ide my face, or so I may perhaps be recognised by friends "

I gave him the *bashlyk*. We were walking along Olginskaya Street. Shakro was whistling a decisive tune.

"Maxim! See zat tram-stop—Verivsky Bridge? You sit zere, vait! Please, vait, I call in vun 'ouse, ask a friend about my people, farver, muvver ..."

"You'll not be long?"

"Strait avay! Vun moment!"

He slipped swiftly into the mouth of a dark and narrow alley, down which he disappeared—forever.

Never again was I to meet this man—the travelling companion of nearly four months of my life, but I often remember him with affection and real amusement.

He taught me much which is not to be found in thick folios written by the wise—for the wisdom of life is always more profound and all-embracing than the wisdom of men.

1894

Grandfather Arkhip and Lyonka

Waiting for the ferry they both lay down in the shade of the steep bank and stared long and silently at the swift, muddy waves of the Kuban washing past their feet Lyonka dozed off but grandfather Arkhip, aware of a dull, constricting pain in his chest, could not fall asleep Against the dark brown background of the earth, their tattered bent figures showed as two pathetic heaps, one—slightly larger, the other—slightly smaller, their weary, sunburnt and dusty faces were of precisely the same colour as their brownish rags

Grandfather Arkhip's long, bony figure was stretched out across a narrow strip of sand which extended like a yellow ribbon the whole length of the shore between the steep bank and the river, the dozing Lyonka was lying curled up at the old man's side Lyonka was small and frail In his rags he resembled a gnarled twig broken away from his grandfather—an ancient, sapless tree, washed up onto the sand by the waves of the river

The old man, raising himself on one elbow, looked across at the opposite shore, sun-drenched and sparsely adorned by occasional scrubby withies, from amongst these bushes jutted the black deck of the ferry

It was a dull, desolate prospect The grey strip of road led away from the river into the depths of the steppe, it seemed somehow relentlessly straight, dry and depressing

His eyes, the dull, inflamed eyes of an old man, the lids red and swollen, blinked anxiously, and the face with its web of wrinkles was set in an expression of weary misery Every now and again he would give a controlled cough and, glancing down at his grandson, cover his mouth with his

hand The cough was hoarse, constricted, forcing the old man to rise from the ground and squeezing great tear-drops from his eyes

This cough and the quiet whispering of the waves on the sand were the only sounds in all the steppe It spread out on either side of the river, vast, brown, burnt by the sun, and only way off in the distance, almost beyond the old man's range of vision, a golden sea of wheat tossed and rippled opulently and the blinding, brilliant sky fell straight down into it Against it were silhouetted the three slender forms of distant poplars, it seemed as though they were growing now bigger, now smaller while the sky and the wheat which it covered rose and fell, shimmering And then suddenly all was hidden behind the gleaming, silver veil of the steppe heat-haze

This veil, streaming, brilliant and elusive, sometimes came flowing from far away to the very bank of the river and then it would seem like another river, suddenly pouring from the sky, as pure and calm as the sky itself

At such times Grandfather Arkhip, unaccustomed to such phenomena, would rub his eyes and think sadly to himself that the heat and the steppe between them were robbing him of his sight as they had already robbed him of the last remnants of strength in his legs

Today he was feeling even worse than he usually had over the last months He felt that he would soon die and, although his own attitude to this was one of complete apathy as to an unavoidable necessity not worth thinking about, he would nevertheless have preferred to die far away from here, in his native village, and he was very worried about his grandson What would happen to Lyonka?

He faced himself with this question several times a day and always something in him contracted, went cold, and he felt so miserable that he wanted to set off back home, to Russia[1] without further delay

But it was a long way to go to Russia. He would not get there now, anyway, he would die on the way Here, in the Kuban, folks were generous with their alms, the people as a

whole were well-off, though dour and of an unkind humour They had no love for beggars because they themselves were rich

His rheumy gaze alighting on his grandson, the old man gently stroked the boy's head with his rough hand

Lyonka stirred and raised his blue eyes to look at him, enormous, expressive eyes, full of an unchildish wistfulness and seeming even wider in the thin, pockmarked little face with the narrow, bloodless lips and sharp nose

"Is it coming?" he asked and, shielding his eyes with his hand, looked towards the river where it sparkled in the rays of the sun

"Not yet, it's not coming It's standing still What is there to bring it over here? There's no one calling it, so it stands there " Arkhip spoke slowly, continuing to stroke the boy's head "Were you asleep?"

Lyonka shook his head uncertainly and stretched himself out on the sand Both were silent for a while

"If I could swim I'd have a bathe," announced Lyonka staring fixedly at the river "The river's such a swift one! We haven't any rivers like that What's it all about? It runs as though it were afraid of being late ."

And Lyonka turned disapprovingly away from the water

"I've got it," said his grandfather after a short pause for thought. "Let's take our belts off and tie them, I'll tie one end round your ankle and you can have your swim "

"Well now!" Lyonka drawled with reasonable scepticism "What'll you think of next! Think it wouldn't pull you in too? We'd both drown!"

"You're right there! It would Eh, but it does race Just think, when it floods in spring—what a sight! And the water meadows—how they get through the mowing! There must be no end to 'em!"

Lyonka was not in a mood to talk and he left his grandfather's words unanswered, picking up a piece of dry clay and reducing it to dust with his fingers, his face serious and concentrated

His grandfather looked at him and thought his own thoughts, puckering his eyes

"There, you see," Lyonka began again in a quiet, monotonous voice, brushing the dust from his hands "This earth, now I took it, and crumbled it up and it turned into dust nothing but tiny, tiny pieces, so small you can hardly see them . "

"Well, and what of that?" asked Arkhip and began to cough, peering through the tears brimming from his eyes at the great, drily sparkling eyes of his grandson "What are you getting at?" he added, having had his cough

"Nothing in particular," Lyonka shook his head "S'pose I meant that all that out here " he waved his hand in the direction of the river "And it's all been built over You and I've been through so many towns! Awful many! And there's such masses of people everywhere!"

And, unable to nail down his thought, Lyonka relapsed into a meditative silence, staring about him

The old man was silent too for a while and then, shifting over to sit close to his grandson, said gently

"There's a clever lad! It's right what you were saying— it's all dust .. The towns, and the people, and you and I—nothing but dust Eh, Lyonka, Lyonka! . If only you could learn to read and write! . You'ld go a long way But what'll become of you as things are?"

The grandfather drew his grandson's head to him and kissed him

"Wait . " Lyonka exclaimed with a little more animation freeing his flaxen locks from his grandfather's gnarled and trembling fingers "What was that you said? Dust? The towns and everything?"

"That's the way God made things, laddie . All is of the earth, and the earth itself is dust And everything on the earth must die That's how things are! And that is why man should earn bread in the sweat of his brow and in humility I shall die soon, too," the grandfather changed the subject abruptly and added miserably, "And where'll you go then, when you don't have me any more, eh?"

Lyonka had often had to listen to this question from his grandfather He was tired of talking about death and he turned away without answering, plucked a blade of grass, put it in his mouth and began to chew slowly

His grandfather, however, could not leave the subject alone

"Why don't you answer? What'll you do when I'm gone, I say?" he asked quietly, bending towards the boy and coughing again

"I've told you already " Lyonka pronounced absent-mindedly and with some irritation, glancing up at his grandfather out of the corner of his eye

Another reason he disliked these conversations was that they often ended in a quarrel His grandfather would expound at length on the proximity of his death At first, Lyonka had listened attentively, had felt frightened at the *threatening change in his circumstances, and had cried but* then he had grown weary of listening—his attention wandered, he began to follow his own line of thought and *his grandfather, when he noticed this, would grow angry* and complain that Lyonka did not love him, did not appreciate his care, and would end by reproaching Lyonka with wishing to be rid of *him, his grandfather, just as soon as* possible

"What do you mean—you've told me? You're a foolish little lad, not fit to find your own way in life How old are you? Rising eleven, no more And a weakling, at that, not fit for hard work Where'll you go? Do you think you'll find kind people to help you? If you had money they'd help you to run through it soon enough—that's for certain But to go about asking for alms is a bitter lot—even for me, an old man Bow your head to everyone, beg from everybody And they curse you, strike you sometimes, send you packing Do you think anyone thinks of a beggar as a real person? No one! It's ten years now since I've been on the roads I know *They value* a piece of bread at a thousand rubles A man'll give you a piece of bread and you can see how he's thinking the gates of heaven are swinging open for him as he does it

Do you think there's any other reason people have for giving? As a sop to their own consciences, my friend, that's their reason, not because they're sorry for you! They push a piece your way so's the food shouldn't stick in their own gullets A full man is a beast And he has no compassion for the man who is hungry They are enemies—the full man and the hungry, and they'll be motes in each other's eyes for ever and ever Because it's not possible for them to understand or pity one another "

The old man grew more and more animated in his bitterness and his misery They made his lips tremble, his dull old eyes blink rapidly in the red frames of their lids and lashes, and the wrinkles on his dark face stand out more clearly defined

Lyonka did not like him in this mood and felt vaguely frightened

"So I'm asking you what are you going to do with the world? You've a poor, sickly lad, and the world's a beast And it'll swallow you up at one gulp And that's what I don't want to happen . I love you, laddie, that's why! You're all I've got and I'm all you've got How'm I going to die, eh? I can't die and leave you with whom? Oh Lord! How has thy servant offended thee?! To live is beyond my strength, and I must not die, because I have to look after the child! Seven years now . I've nursed . in my old arms Oh Lord, help me!"

The old man sat up and burst into tears, hiding his head in his puny weak knees.

The river went hurrying on into the distance, splashing loudly up against the banks as though it wished to drown out the sound of the old man's lament The cloudless sky smiled a brilliant smile, pouring down a burning heat, harkening calmly to the rebellious clamour of the turgid waters.

"There, there, granddad, don't cry," Lyonka spoke sternly, averting his eyes, and then, turning to face the old man, added, "We've been through it all before I'll be all right. I'll take a job in some tavern or other. ."

"They'll beat you to death " groaned his grandfather through his tears

"And maybe they won't Maybe they won't, at that!" Lyonka's voice was reckless, almost challenging "And so what? I'm not a lamb for anybody's fleecing!"

At this point, Lyonka broke off suddenly for some reason and, after a brief silence, added quietly

"And I can always go into a monastery "

"If you'd go into a monastery, now!" sighed his grandfather, coming to life, and again began to writhe in a fit of breathless coughing

Above their heads sounded the scrape of wheels

"Fe-erry! Fe-erry—hey!" The very air was split by the stentorian voice

They jumped to their feet, picking up their staves and knapsacks.

With a piercing scraping sound a cart drove out onto the sand Standing up in it was a Cossack Throwing back his head in its shaggy cap well down over one ear, he was preparing to let out another yell, drawing the air through his open mouth which made his wide, protruding chest protrude even further His white teeth flashed in the silken frame of his beard which began growing just under the blood-shot eyes Beneath his open shirt and the *chokha*[2] thrown carelessly over his shoulders could be glimpsed a hirsute, sunburnt torso His whole figure, large and solid, together with his well-fleshed, also monstrously large, skewbald horse and the fat tyres on the high wheels of his cart—exuded prosperity, strength and health

"Hey! Hey!"

Grandfather and grandson pulled off their caps and bowed low

"Good day!" grunted the newcomer abruptly and, having cast a glance at the far bank where the black ferry was emerging slowly and awkwardly from the bushes, transferred his full attention to the beggars. "From Russia, are you?"

"From Russia, kind sir!" answered Arkhip with a bow

"Short of vitals there, eh?"

He leapt down to the ground from his cart and began to tighten some parts of the harness

"Even the cockroaches are dying of hunger "

"Ho-ho! The cockroaches dying? If there's not a crumb left for them, must mean you lick the platter clean You're good eaters But you must be bad workers When you begin to work properly that'll be an end to your famines "

"It's the earth, good sir, that's at the bottom of it It's no longer fertile We've sucked it dry "

"The earth?" The Cossack shook his head "The earth should always be fertile, to that end was it given to man Say hands, not earth The hands are to blame In good hands even a stone will yield a crop "

The ferry arrived

Two tough, red-faced Cossacks, their thick legs braced against the deck of the ferry, pulled it noisily up onto the bank, swayed at the impact, dropped the rope and looked across at one another, panting and puffing

"Hot?" The newcomer grinned, touching his cap as he led his horse onto the ferry

"Uhu!" answered one of the ferrymen, pushing his hands deep into the pockets of his *sharovari*, and, walking up to the cart, glanced into it and twitched his nose, sniffing gustily

The other man sat down on the floor and, groaning, began to take off one of his boots

Lyonka and his grandfather boarded the ferry and leant up against the side, keeping an eye on the Cossacks

"Well, let's go!" commanded the owner of the cart

"Haven't you got anything to drink with you?" asked the one who had inspected the cart His comrade had taken off his boot and was examining it with narrowed eyes

"Nothing Why? Is the Kuban running dry of water?"

"Water! I didn't mean water "

"You meant spirits? Don't carry the stuff "

"How come you don't carry it?" his interlocuter wondered aloud, his eyes boring into the floor of the ferry

"Come on, now Let's go!"

The Cossack spat on his hands and took hold of the rope The passenger began to help him

"Hey, granddad, why don't you lend a hand?" the ferryman who was still busy with his shoe turned to Arkhip

"It's beyond my strength, brother!" the old man answered in a sing-song whine

"And they don't need any help They'll manage by themselves!"

As though to convince Arkhip of the truth of his words, the man went heavily down on one knee and then lay down on the deck of the ferry

His comrade cursed him lazily and, receiving no answer, stamped his feet loudly, bracing himself on the deck

Under constant pressure from the current, accompanied by the muffled sound of the waves lapping against its sides, the ferry rocked and shuddered, waging its way slowly forward

Looking at the water, Lyonka felt that his head was spinning sweetly and his eyes, wearied by the rapid course of the waves, were closing sleepily The muttering of his grandfather which seemed to be coming from a long way away, the creaking of the rope and the sucking splash of the waves were sending him to sleep, he was about to sink down onto the deck in a drowsy lethargy when suddenly something gave him such a jolt that he fell over

Opening his eyes wide he looked about him The Cossacks were laughing at him as they moored the ferry to a charred stump on the bank

"Went off to sleep, eh? Poor little runt! Get in the cart I'll take you as far as the village You hop in too, granddad "

Thanking the Cossack in a deliberately snuffling voice the old man clambered groaning into the cart Lyonka jumped up beside him and they set off in a cloud of fine black dust which set the old man coughing so hard that he had to struggle for breath

The Cossack began to sing His song consisted of strange sounds He broke off the notes in the middle and ended in a

whistle It was as though he were unravelling sounds like threads from a tangled ball and snapping them off short whenever he came to a knot

The wheels creaked protestingly, the dust whirled up from under them, the old man, his head shaking, coughed continually, and Lyonka thought of how they would soon come to the village and would have to sing "Lord Jesus Christ" in nasal tones beneath the windows Once again the village boys would bait him and the women bore him with their everlasting questions about Russia At such times it was agony to him to see his grandfather, coughing more often and stooping so low it was painful and awkward for him, putting on a whining voice and telling tales of things that could never have happened anywhere, punctuated by sniffs and sobs . He would tell how in Russia people were dying in the streets and were left lying there where they had fallen because there was no one to bury them, all the people were so stunned and apathetic from hunger Lyonka and his granddad had never seen anything of the kind anywhere But it was all necessary to collect more alms Yet what could one do with charitable offerings in this part of the world? At home you could always sell any leftovers for forty kopeks or even half a ruble a pood, but here you would never find a buyer Afterwards there was often nothing left for it but to empty their packs of the frequently delicious morsels of food which folks had given them somewhere out on the steppe

"Going on collection?" enquired the Cossack, glancing over his shoulder at the two bent figures

"Of course, worthy sir!" Arkhip answered him with a sigh

"Stand up, granddad, I'll show you where I live You can come and spend the night at my place "

The old man tried to get to his feet but fell and, striking his side against the edge of the cart, let out a suppressed groan

"Eh, you *are* old, aren't you?" rumbled the Cossack sympathetically "Well, never mind, you needn't look, when

the time comes you need somewhere to spend the night, you ask for Chorny, Andrei Chorny, that's me And now get off Good-bye!"

Grandfather and grandson found themselves in front of a stand of silver and black poplars Between their trunks there was a glimpse of roofs and fences, and everywhere they looked, to right and to left, towered similar stands of trees Their green foliage was covered in grey dust and the bark of the thick, stubborn trunks was all cracked with heat

Directly before the beggars a narrow lane passed between two lines of wattle fencing and they set off along it with the shambling stride of people who spend much of their time walking

"Well, how shall we take it, together or separately?" asked the old man and, not waiting for an answer, added "Together would be better—you get next to nothing on your own You don't know how to beg "

"And what do we need all that much for? We won't be able to get through it anyway " answered Lyonka frowning, staring about him

"What do we need it for? You've not a grain of sense lad! What if we should come across someone and really hook him? He'd give money And money is worth having, with money in your pocket and a bit of luck you'll come to no harm when I'm dead "

And, smiling tenderly, the grandfather ran his hand through his grandson's hair

"Do you know how much I've put aside since we've been on the road? Eh?"

"How much?" asked Lyonka indifferently

"Eleven and a half rubles! There!"

But Lyonka was impressed neither by the sum of money nor by his grandfather's tone of rapturous pride

"Eh, you baby, you baby!" sighed the old man "So we'll take it separately, shall we?"

"Separately "

"Well All right, then, you go on to the church "

"Okay "

Arkhip turned into the lane leading off to the left and Lyonka went straight on He had not gone more than ten steps when he heard a quavering voice "Kind folk and providers!" The exhortation sounded as though someone had drawn the palm of his hand from the base to the highest treble of an untuned harp Lyonka shuddered and went on more quickly Whenever he heard his grandfather begging he felt ill-at-ease and somehow miserable and, when the old man met with a refusal, he was even frightened that his grandfather would burst into tears

The quavering, pathetic notes of his grandfather's voice were still sounding in his ears, hovering in the drowsy, oppressive air above the village Lyonka went to the wattle fence and sat down in the shadow of the overhanging branches of a cherry-tree From somewhere nearby sounded the resonant buzzing of a bee

Casting off his pack, Lyonka laid his head upon it and, after gazing for a short time at the sky through the leaves above his head, went sound asleep, sheltered from the eyes of passers-by by the thick tall weeds and the checkered shadow of the wattle fence

He was awakened by strange sounds vibrating in the air which had already grown fresher from the proximity of evening Someone not far away from him was weeping The weeping was that of a child—wholehearted and uncontrolled The sound of the sobs began to fade on a high, minor key, then suddenly burst out again with renewed intensity and continued to pour forth as it came closer He raised his head and peered out at the lane through the grass

Along it was walking a girl of about seven, cleanly dressed, her face, which every now and again she would attempt to dry with the hem of her white skirt, all red and swollen from weeping She walked slowly, dragging her bare feet along the road, kicking up the thick dust and obviously unaware of where she was going—or why She had big, black eyes, just now—hurt, sad and full of tears, small, fine, pink ears peeped mischievously from under locks of

chestnut hair which, all untidy, were falling over her forehead, her cheeks, her shoulders.

She seemed very comical to Lyonka, in spite of her tears ... comical and merry.... A real imp, by the look of her.

"What are you crying-for?" he asked, scrambling to his feet as she came level with him.

She started and stopped short, ceasing to cry at once but still sniffing surreptitiously. Then, when she had looked him over for a few seconds, her lips began to tremble again, her face wrinkled, her chest heaved and, bursting into tears again, she went on her way.

Lyonka felt his heart contracting and suddenly set out after her.

"Don't cry. You're a big girl—you ought to be ashamed of yourself!" he began before he had caught her up and then, when he came up level with her, looked into her face and asked again, "Well now, what's making you blub like that?"

"O-oh!" she moaned. "It's all very well for you..." and suddenly dropped down in the dust of the road, covering her face with her hands and keening despairingly.

"Well!" Lyonka made a scornful gesture, rejecting all further responsibility. "Women! There's women for you! Shame!"

But that was of no help to either of them. Lyonka, watching the tears trickle out one by one from between her slender pink fingers, felt sad and wanted to cry too. He bent down over her and, carefully raising his hand, gently touched her hair but plucked it back at once as though afraid of his own boldness. She continued to cry and said nothing.

"Listen!" began Lyonka after a moment's silence, feeling a very real desire to help her. "What's the matter with you? Someone been knocking you about, have they? You'll soon get over it! Or maybe it's something else? Tell me! Eh!"

The girl, not taking her hands from her face, shook her head sadly and finally answered him slowly through her sobs, wriggling her shoulders.

"My head-scarf—I've lost it! Dad brought it from the market, a blue one with flowers, and I put it on—and lost it " And she burst out crying again, still louder and more violently, gasping for breath and letting out strange little moans o-o-o!

Lyonka felt powerless to help her and, drawing timidly back from her, gazed thoughtfully and sadly at the darkening sky He was feeling miserable and very sorry for the little girl

"Don't cry! Perhaps it'll turn up " he whispered quietly but, noticing that she did not even hear his attempts to comfort her, edged away still further, thinking that she would probably be in bad trouble with her father for the loss At once he saw in his mind's eye her father, a great, black Cossack, standing over the girl and striking her, and she, choking with tears and trembling with fear and pain, sinking to the ground at his feet

He stood up and walked away but, about five paces from her, turned abruptly back and, stopping directly in front of her, his back to the fence, struggled to think of something tender and kind

"Come, little girl, get up off the road! Now, stop crying, do now! Go home and tell them everything just as it happened Just say you lost it What's a kerchief, after all?"

He had begun to speak in a quiet, sympathetic voice and, ending on an indignant exclamation, was delighted to see that she was getting up off the ground

"That's fine now!" he went on, smiling and animated "Now you go on home Would you like me to come with you and tell them all about it? I'll back you up, don't be afraid "

Lyonka squared his shoulders proudly and looked about him

"Better not. " she whispered, slowly brushing the dust from her dress and struggling with her sobs

"I will if you like," offered Lyonka very readily and tugged his cap down on one ear

Now he was standing before her, his legs wide apart, which made the rags he was wearing appear to be standing

defiantly on end He banged the ground firmly with his stick and looked her full in the face, his great sad eyes gleaming with dauntless pride

The little girl gave him a sidelong glance as she wiped the tears all over her little face and, with another sigh, said

"Better not, don't come Mum doesn't like beggars "

Whereupon she walked away from him, turning round twice to look back

Lyonka felt deflated Gradually, in slow movements he altered his challenging pose, hunched his back, reassumed his humble stance and, throwing his pack, which had been dangling from one hand, over his shoulder, shouted out after the girl who was already rounding the corner of the lane

"Good-bye!"

She turned back to him without halting in her stride and disappeared

Evening was drawing near and the air was heavy with that peculiar stifling oppressiveness which precedes a storm The sun was low in the sky and the tops of the poplars were glowing with a delicate, reflected flush At the same time the evening shadows which wrapped their lower branches made them, tall and motionless as they were, appear still more dense, still taller . The sky above them was growing dark, too, becoming velvety and sinking lower and lower over the earth Somewhere far away there was a sound of people talking and, even further—singing These sounds, quiet but rich and deep, seemed to be permeated with the same stifling heaviness

Lyonka felt even more lonely and even rather nervous He decided to rejoin his grandfather, looked around and went swiftly on along the lane He did not feel like begging He walked and felt the heart in his breast beating rapidly and he was overcome by a peculiar, lethargic reluctance to walk or to think At the same time, he could not get the little girl out of his mind and kept wondering "What's happening to her now? If she's from a rich house they'll beat her all the rich are misers, but if she's poor then maybe they won't In poor homes they love the children more 'cause

they look forward to the time when they'll help with the work " One thought after another buzzed insistently through his head and the wearisome, soul-searing unhappiness which dogged these thoughts like a shadow became more oppressive and took ever firmer possession of him

The evening shadows grew ever denser and heavier Lyonka began to meet with occasional groups of Cossacks and their womenfolk who walked past without paying him any attention, having already become accustomed to the influx of famine-ridden Russians He, too, spared their well-fed, strong figures no more than an apathetic, dull-eyed glance and made his way quickly past them towards the church—its cross was gleaming above the village in front of him

The sound of a homebound herd was born towards him on the still air Here was the church, a low, broad building with five blue-painted cupolas, planted about with poplars whose summits had grown higher than the crosses which shone pinky-gold through the green, bathed in the rays of the setting sun

And there was his grandfather approaching the porch of the church, bending under the weight of his pack and looking about him, shading his eyes with his hand

After his grandfather, with a heavy, shambling step, a Cossack was walking, his cap well down over his eyes and a stick in his hand

"Well, your pack's empty, is it?" asked the grandfather making his way towards his grandson who had stopped to wait for him at the entrance to the church-yard "See how much I've collected!" And, grunting with the effort, he swung a tightly-packed canvas sack from his shoulders to the ground "Oof! . Very responsive, the people here! Ah, that's good! .. Well, and what are you looking so down in the mouth for?"

"My head's aching," said Lyonka quietly, sinking down on the ground beside his grandfather

"You don't say? . Tired? We'll go and settle down for the night now What was that Cossack called? Eh?"

"Andrei Chorny"

"We'll ask them where's Chorny, Andrei? Where does he live? That's what we'll say There's someone coming now Yes. Fine people, prosperous! And they eat nothing but wheaten bread Good day to you, good sir!"

The Cossack came right up to them and replied to the old man's greeting with deliberate emphasis

"And good day to you, too!"

After which, his legs straddled and his great, expressionless eyes fixed on the beggars, he scratched his head in silence

Lyonka stared at him curiously, Arkhip blinked his old eyes enquiringly, the Cossack continued to say nothing and, finally, pushing his tongue half out, began to fish for the end of his moustache Having successfully completed this operation, he sucked the moustache into his mouth, chewed it, pushed it out again with the tip of his tongue and, at last, broke the silence which had already become oppressive, drawling lazily

"Well, let's go along to Headquarters"

"What for?" The old man was suddenly all of a quake.

"Orders Come along!"

He turned his back on them and would have started off but, glancing over his shoulder and seeing that neither of them had moved, cried out again, sharply this time

"What are you waiting for?"

Then Lyonka and his grandfather set out after him

Lyonka kept his eyes fixed on his grandfather and, seeing how his head and lips were quivering, how nervously he looked about him and how he hastily began to feel about under his shirt, felt sure that the old man had been up to no good again, like that last time in Taman He felt thoroughly scared when he remembered that business in Taman On that occasion, the old man had stolen some washing off the line and had been caught with it

They had been laughed at, cursed, beaten up even and, finally, had been driven from the village in the middle of the night They had slept on the sand somewhere on the shore

of the sound and the sea had kept up a threatening grumble all night long The sand had creaked, shifted by the mounting waves, and all night long his grandfather had kept moaning and praying to God in a whisper, calling himself a thief and imploring forgiveness

"Lyonka "

Lyonka, feeling a sudden dig in the ribs, started and looked round at his grandfather The old man's face was drawn, dry, grey and all of a tremble

The Cossack was walking on about five paces ahead of them smoking his pipe, whacking the heads off thistles as he walked and not bothering to look back to see whether they were following

"Take this, there! Throw it into the weeds .. and mark the place where you throw it! So's to pick it up afterwards . " whispered his grandfather scarcely audibly and, brushing up close against his grandson as he walked, pressed a piece of tightly rolled cloth into his hand

Lyonka drifted off to one side, trembling with the terror that immediately froze his whole being, and edged over to the fence under which the weeds grew in a dense tangle Staring tensely at the broad back of their Cossack escort, he pushed out his hand and, stealing a brief glance at the piece of cloth, dropped it into the grass

As it fell the cloth opened and a blue-flowered head-scarf fluttered for a moment before Lyonka's eyes, only to be obscured at once by the image of the little girl crying He could see her as clearly as though she were really there, blotting out the Cossack, his grandfather and all around him The sound of her sobs again came clearly to Lyonka's ears and it seemed to him as though her transparent tear-drops were falling on the earth before him

In this almost insensate condition he trailed along behind his grandfather to the Cossack Headquarters, listened to a deep buzz of words which he made no effort to understand, saw as if through a mist how the bits and pieces from his grandfather's pack were emptied out onto a large table and heard how they plopped softly down onto the

table Then many heads in high hats bent down over the table, the heads and the hats were dark and frowning and from behind the mists which appeared to be wreathing all about them there seemed to emanate some frightful menace Then, suddenly, his grandfather, spun round like a top in the hands of two sturdy young men, began mumbling something in a hoarse voice

"You're on the wrong track, good Christians. As God sees me, I'm not guilty!" his grandfather squealed piercingly

Lyonka, bursting into tears, sank to the floor

Then they came up to him, lifted him, sat him on a bench and searched through all the rags which clad his small, skinny body

"Danilovna's lying, the damned woman!" roared someone in a rich, angry voice as painful to Lyonka as a box on the ears

"Maybe they got it hidden somewhere?" the answering suggestion was even louder

Lyonka felt that all these noises were striking him about the head and he was suddenly so scared that he lost consciousness as though he had dived head-first into a black, fathomless pit which suddenly yawned open to swallow him

When he opened his eyes, his head was lying on his grandfather's knees, his grandfather's face was bent over him, more pathetic and wrinkled than usual and, from his grandfather's nervously blinking eyes, small opaque tears were dripping onto Lyonka's forehead and tickling terribly as they ran over his cheeks and down his neck .

"Come to, have you, sonny? Let's get out of here Come on, they've let us go, curse them!"

Lyonka rose, feeling as though something heavy had been poured into his head and that at any moment it might drop from his shoulders He took it in his hands and swayed, moaning quietly

"Your poor head's aching, is it? My poor little lad! They've pestered the life out of us. . Brutes! A dagger's been lost, d'you see, and a little girl's mislaid her scarf, and

what must they do but all go and gang up against us! Eh, Lord, Lord! Why art thou so straightening us?"

The old man's wheezing voice touched Lyonka on the raw and he felt a pricking spark burn up inside him which made him draw away from his grandfather Having withdrawn a little he looked round

They were sitting on the outskirts of the village in the dense shadow of a gnarled black poplar It was already night, the moon had come up and its milky silver light, pouring out over the flat immensities of the steppe, seemed to make it somehow narrower than in the daytime, narrower and still more wretched and desolate From far away, from the line where the steppe ran into the sky, the clouds billowed up quietly and quietly sailed above the steppe, blotting out the moon and casting impenetrable shadows onto the earth beneath them The shadows lay thick on the earth and crawled slowly and thoughtfully over it and then, suddenly, disappeared as though hiding in the crevices of the earth Voices sounded from the village and here and there lights came on and winked up at the brilliant, golden stars

"Come on, laddy! We must be getting on," said the grandfather

"Let's sit for a little longer!" said Lyonka quietly

He loved the steppe Trudging over it in the daylight he liked to look ahead to where the vault of heaven came down to rest on its wide breast Away over there he imagined big and wonderful towns inhabited by kindly people such as he had never met with, of whom it would not be necessary to beg bread They would give of themselves, without being asked And when the steppe, stretching wider and wider before his eyes, would suddenly reveal just another village, familiar before he reached it, its buildings and people just like all those that he had seen before, he would feel sad, hurt, cheated

So now he was thoughtfully gazing out into the distance towards the slowly gathering clouds He saw them as smoke from the thousands of chimneys of that town which he so

desired to see . His day-dreaming was interrupted by his grandfather's dry coughing

Lyonka looked hard at his grandfather's face, wet with tears as he gasped avidly for air

Illumined by the moon and scoured by strange shadows falling from the ragged hat, the brows and the beard, this face with its desperately working mouth and wide-open eyes beaming with a kind of secret rapture was at once frightening and pathetic, and awoke in Lyonka some new feeling which made him move a little away from his grandfather .

"Well, we shall sit for a little longer, then, a little longer!" the old man muttered and, giggling foolishly, began to feel around in the front of his shirt.

Lyonka turned from him and again began to look away into the distance

"Lyonka! Look here!" his grandfather exclaimed suddenly on a gasp of enthusiasm and, still doubled up by the suffocating cough, handed his grandson something long and shining "It's chased with silver! Silver, do you hear me? It's worth all of 50 rubles! .."

His hands and lips were aquiver with pain and the lust for money and his whole face was twitching

Lyonka shuddered and pushed away his hand

"Hide it! Oh, granddad, hide it quick!" he whispered imploringly, casting a quick glance round him

"Now what's the matter with you, silly boy? Afraid, my dear? . I just looked into the window and there it was hanging there I grabbed it—and—under my coat with it And then I hid it in the bushes As we went out of the village I pretended to drop my hat, bent down and picked it up . They're fools! And I got back the scarf, too—here it is!"

With trembling hands he extracted the scarf from among his rags and waved it in front of Lyonka's nose

A misty curtain seemed to fall apart before Lyonka's eyes to disclose the following picture he and his grandfather are walking as quickly as they can along the main street of the

village, avoiding the eyes of the people they meet, walking in fear, and it seems to Lyonka that everyone who wishes to has the right to strike them, spit at them, covet them with abuse All their surroundings, the fences, the houses, the trees, are rocking in a strange kind of fog as though from a great wind . and there is a buzz of stern, angry voices

This miserable road stretches on and on, and the way out from the village into the fields is hidden by the rocking houses which now press down upon them as though to crush them, now withdraw to laugh in their faces from the dark patches which are their windows . And, suddenly, there is a ringing cry from one of the windows "Thieves! Thieves! Thieves and pilferers!" Lyonka steals a glance in the direction of the voice and at the window he catches sight of the little girl whom he had not so long ago seen weeping and wanted to protect She catches his eye and puts out her tongue, and her black eyes sparkle angrily and sharply and pierce Lyonka like needles

This picture arose in the boy's mind and disappeared immediately leaving behind it the malicious smile with which he now faced his grandfather

The old man was still mumbling on, interrupting himself with his cough, gesticulating, shaking his head and wiping away the sweat which welled up in great drops along the wrinkles of his face

A heavy cloud, all ragged and torn, had come up and covered the moon, and Lyonka could hardly see his grandfather's face . But beside him he placed the image of the weeping girl, and weighed them against one another in the scales of his thought. Beside her, injured by him, all in tears but healthy, fresh and beautiful, Lyonka's sick, avaricious, tattered grandfather with his creaking joints and rasping voice seemed altogether superfluous—almost as wicked and foul as Kashchey from the fairy-tale How could he? Why had he injured her? She was no kin of his .

And his grandfather wheezed on

"If only I could save a hundred rubles! Then I would die in peace . "

"Stop it!" something seemed to flare up inside Lyonka "Better keep your mouth shut! I'd die, you say, I'd die but you don't die You steal!" squealed Lyonka and suddenly, all of a tremble, leapt to his feet "You're an old thief! Oo-oo!" And, clenching his dry little fist, he began shaking it before the nose of his suddenly silent grandfather and sunk heavily back to earth again, continuing between his teeth "You stole from a child . Ah, a fine way to behave! An old man, and still a sinner . There'll be no pardon for you in heaven for this!"

Suddenly, the whole steppe flickered and, lit up from end to end in blinding blue, was exposed in all its immeasurable vastness Momentarily, the darkness in which it had been hidden lifted There was a clap of thunder Roaring and vibrating it rolled across the steppe, shaking both the earth and the sky, which was now covered with a swiftly flying wrack of black clouds which had quite drowned the moon

It became very dark Somewhere far away the lightning was playing, silently as yet but menacingly, and a second later another, fainter growl of thunder sounded Then silence fell, a silence which, it seemed, was never to be broken

Lyonka crossed himself His grandfather sat silent and motionless, as though he had grown into the trunk of the tree against which he was leaning

"Granddad!" whispered Lyonka, fearfully awaiting a new clap of thunder "Let's go back to the village!"

The sky shuddered and again flared up in blue flame, striking the earth with vast, metallic power It was as though thousands of sheets of iron were being scattered over the earth, clattering against one another as they fell .

"Granddad!" shouted Lyonka.

His shout, deadened by the echo of the thunder, sounded more like the chime of a little broken bell

"What's the matter? Afraid?" his grandfather said hoarsely, without moving

Great drops of rain began to fall and the whisper of them was so mysterious that it seemed like a warning Far away it had already increased to a widespread, continuous sound like a huge brush sweeping over the dry earth—but here, where the two were sitting, every drop which fell to the earth sounded short and sharp and died away without echo The claps of thunder came nearer and nearer and the sky flared more often

"I won't go to the village! Let the rain drown me here, old dog, thief that I am, let the thunder strike me dead," said Arkhip, struggling for breath "I won't go! You go alone There it is, the village Go on! I don't want you sitting here .. Go on! Go, go! Go! "

The old man was already shouting, hoarsely and without resonance

"Granddad! Forgive me!" Lyonka implored him, moving nearer

"I won't go I won't forgive .. Seven years I've mothered you! Everything for you .. I lived for you Do you think I have any needs for myself? . I'm dying Dying and you say—a thief Why am I a thief? For you .. it's all for you . There, take it take it go on To set you up in life for you I saved and yes, I stole God sees everything . He knows that I stole knows He'll punish me He won't forgive me, old dog that I am for stealing He's punished me already Lord! Hast thou punished me? Eh? Hast thou? Thou hast slain me with the hand of a child! Rightly, O Lord! . Quite right! Thou art just, O Lord! Go on, send for my soul Oh!"

The old man's voice had risen to a piercing squeal which struck terror into Lyonka's breast

The claps of thunder which were shaking the steppe and the sky now reverberated in bustling chaos of echoes as though each of them wanted to say something important and necessary to the earth, each hurrying to shout the other down in an almost continuous uproar The lightning-torn sky quivered, the steppe was rumbling, now ablaze with blue fire, now plunged in cold, heavy, dense darkness which

made it strangely smaller and narrower Sometimes the lightning lit up the most distant parts of the steppe And these distant parts, so it seemed, were fleeing precipitously from all the sound and the roaring

The rain began to pour down and its drops, shining like steel in the flashes of lightning, blotted out the welcoming twinkle of the village lights

Lyonka was paralysed with fear, cold and a miserable sense of guilt born of his grandfather's outburst He looked straight ahead with wide open eyes and, fearing to so much as blink even when the drops of water rolled down into them from his rain-drenched hair, he listened for the voice of his grandfather, drowned out by the sea of mighty sounds

Lyonka felt that his grandfather was sitting motionless but it seemed to him that he was about to disappear, to go off somewhere or other and to leave him all alone Hardly realising what he was doing, he edged closer and closer to his grandfather and, when he touched him with his elbow, he shuddered, expecting something terrible

Rending the sky, the lightning illumined the two of them, side by side, bent and small, under the water which poured down on them from the branches of the tree ..

The grandfather waved his arms in the air and kept muttering something, wearily now and breathing very laboriously

Looking him in the face, Lyonka cried out in fear In the blue gleam of the lightning it appeared dead and the dull, rolling eyes were the eyes of a madman

"Granddad! Let's go!" he squealed, hiding his face in his grandfather's knees

The old man bent down to him, embracing him with his skinny, bony arms and, hugging him hard, let out a sudden strong, piercing howl like a wolf caught in a trap

Goaded almost to madness by this howling Lyonka tore away from him, jumped to his feet and ran off straight ahead, eyes wide open, blinded by the lightning, falling, scrambling to his feet and plunging even further into the

darkness, now dispersed by the blue flame of the lightning, now closing in again densely around the panic-stricken boy

The sound of the falling rain was cold, monotonous, desolate And it seemed that in all the steppe there was no one and nothing but the sound of the rain, the flashing of the lightning and the angry roar of the thunder

The morning of the following day, some boys who had run out beyond the outskirts of the village turned back at once and raised the alarm, announcing that they had seen the beggar of yesterday under a black poplar and that he had most probably had his throat cut because an abandoned dagger was lying beside him

However, when the elder Cossacks came to look they found that this was not so The old man was still alive When they went up to him he tried to rise from the ground but could not He had lost the power of speech, but his tearful eyes held a question and searched and searched from face to face in the crowd but found no answer.

Towards evening he died and they buried him where they had found him, under the black poplar, considering that he did not merit a place in hallowed ground Firstly, he was a stranger, secondly—a thief, and thirdly, he had died without absolution Beside him in the mud they found the dagger and the scarf

A few days later they found Lyonka.

Above one of the long steppe gullies not far from the village a flock of crows began to circle and when they went to look they found a little boy lying face downwards, arms outspread, in the liquid mud which the storm had left at the bottom of the gully

At first they decided to bury him in the church burial ground because he was still a child, but after some deliberation decided to lay him together with his grandfather under the same black poplar Here they raised a mound of earth and, on the top of it, erected a rough, stone cross

1893

Old Izergil

I These stories were told to me on the shore of the sea near Akkerman in Bessarabia.

One evening, when our grape-picking was over for the day, the group of Moldavians with whom I had been working went down to the sea-shore, leaving me and an old woman named Izergil lying in the deep shadow of the grape-vines, silently watching the silhouettes of the people, who had gone down to the shore, merge with the blue shadows of night.

They sang and laughed as they went, the men were bronzed by the sun, they had thick black moustaches and curly hair that hung down to their shoulders, and they were wearing short jackets and wide trousers tight at the ankle, the girls and women were gay, they had dark-blue eyes and graceful bodies, and their skins were as bronzed as the men's Their silky black hair hung loose and the warm breeze played with it, making the coins plaited into it tinkle. The wind flowed over us in a broad continuous current, but from time to time it seemed to come up against some obstacle, and then there would be a great gust that blew out the women's hair, making it stream about their heads in fantastic manes This gave them the appearance of strange creatures out of fairy-tales As they went farther and farther away, the night and my imagination clothed them in increasing beauty

Someone was playing a violin, a girl was singing in a deep throaty voice, bursts of laughter could be heard .

The air was heavy with the tang of the sea and the vapours rising from the earth, which had been drenched by rain just before nightfall Even now tattered storm clouds were floating across the sky in odd forms and colourings— here they were vague, like columns of smoke, grey and

ashen-blue, there they were mottled black and brown and as sharp as fragments of rock And between them gleamed the tender night sky dotted with gold All of this—the sounds and the smells, the clouds and the people—was sad and beautiful and seemed to be the preface to a marvellous tale It was as if everything had been checked in its growth and was dying The sound of voices faded as they receded, becoming but mournful sighs

"Why did you not go with them?" asked old Izergil, nodding in the direction of the sea

She had become bent in two by time, her eyes, once shining black, were now dull and rheumy And she had a strange voice—it sounded as if her tongue were made of crunching bone

"I did not wish to," I replied

"You Russians are born old All of you are as gloomy as demons Our girls are afraid of you But you, my lad, are young and strong "

The moon came up Large, round and blood-red, it seemed to have emerged from the bowels of that steppe which had swallowed up so much human flesh and blood, this, perhaps, was why it was so rich and fertile The old woman and I were caught in the lacy shadow of the leaves as in a net Across the steppe, which extended to our left, flitted cloud shadows made pale and transparent by the blue moonshine

"Look, there goes Larra!"

I turned to where the old woman pointed a crooked shaking finger and saw the shadows moving—there were many of them, and one, darker than the others, was travelling faster, it was cast by a wisp of cloud sailing closer to the earth and more swiftly than its sisters

"There is no one there," I said

"You are blinder than me, an old woman Look Do you not see something dark fleeing across the steppe?"

I looked again, and again saw nothing but shadows

"It is only a shadow Why do you call it Larra?"

"Because it is Larra A shadow is all that is left of him,

and no wonder—he has been living for thousands of years The sun has dried up his flesh and blood and bones and the wind has scattered them like dust. Just see how God can punish a man for his pride!"

"Tell me the story," I said to the old woman, anticipating one of those delightful tales born of the steppe

And she told me the story.

"Many thousands of years have passed since this occurred Far across the sea in the land of the rising sun flows a great river, and every leaf and blade of grass in that land casts a shadow large enough to hide a man from the sun, which pours down mercilessly

"The earth is lavish of its gifts in that country

"A tribe of powerful people once lived there, they tended their flocks and showed great strength and courage in hunting wild animals. And they feasted when the hunt was over, singing songs and making merry with the maids

"One day, during such a feast, an eagle dropped out of the sky and carried off a black-haired maiden as lovely as the night. The arrows the men sent after the bird fell back on the ground without injuring it. And so the men set out in search of the maiden, but they could not find her. And in time she was forgotten, as everything on this earth is forgotten "

The old woman drew a deep sigh and fell silent When she spoke in her cracked voice it was as if she were voicing the sentiments of all the forgotten ages embodied in the shades of remembrance dwelling in her breast Softly the sea echoed the introduction to this ancient legend which may have had beginning on these very shores.

"But in twenty years she herself came back, worn and wizened, and with her was a youth as strong and handsome as she had been twenty years before And when she was asked where she had been, she replied that the eagle had carried her off to the mountains and had made her his wife This was their son The eagle was no more, on feeling his strength ebbing he had soared high into the sky for the last

time and, folding his wings, had plunged to his death upon the jagged cliffs

"Everyone gazed in amazement at the son of the eagle, and they saw that he in no way differed from them except that his eyes had the cold proud gleam of the king of birds When they addressed him, he sometimes did not deign to reply, and when the elders of the tribe approached him, he spoke to them as their equal This they took as an insult, and they called him an unfeathered arrow with an unsharpened tip, and they told him that thousands like him and thousands twice his age paid them homage and obeyed their commands But he looked them boldly in the eye and said that there were no others like himself, let others pay them homage if they wished, but he had no mind to Oh, then the elders were angry indeed, and in their anger they said

"'There can be no place for him among us Let him go wherever he wishes'

"He laughed and went where he wished he went over to a fair maid who had been watching him intently, and he took her in his arms She was the daughter of one of the elders who had reproved him And although he was very handsome, she thrust him away, for she was afraid of her father She thrust him away and walked off, and he struck her mightily, and when she fell down he stamped upon her breast until the blood spurted out of her mouth as high as the sky, and the maiden heaved a great sigh and writhed like a snake and died

"Those who saw this happen were speechless with fear, never before had they seen a woman killed so brutally And for a long time they stood there in silence, looking at her where she lay with wide-open eyes and blood-stained mouth, and at him who was standing beside her, alone, apart from everyone else, very proud—he even held his head high as if he were calling down punishment upon it. When at last people recovered from the shock, they seized him and bound him and left him there, finding that to kill him now would be too simple and would give them little satisfaction "

The night deepened and darkened and became filled with odd little sounds The marmots peeped mournfully in the steppe, the grasshoppers whirred among the vines, the leaves sighed and whispered to one another, and the disc of the moon, which had been blood-red, paled as it withdrew from the earth and poured its blue light down on the steppe lavishly

"And then the elders gathered to decide on a punishment worthy of such a crime At first they thought of having horses tear him to pieces, but this seemed too mild, they thought of having each of them send an arrow into his body, but this, too, was rejected, it was suggested that they burn him alive, but the smoke of the fire would hide his sufferings from them, many suggestions were made, but not one of them satisfied everyone And all the while his mother knelt silently before them, finding neither words nor tears to move them to pity For a long time they spoke together, and at last one of their wise men said, after due consideration

"'Let us ask him why he has done this'

"And they asked him

"'Unbind me,' he said 'I shall not say a word so long as I am bound'

"And when they had unbound him he said

"'What would you have of me?'—and his tone was that of a master to his slaves

"'You have heard,' said the wise man

"'Why should I explain my actions to you?'

"'That we may understand them Listen, proud one it is certain that you are to die, then help us to understand why you have done such a thing We shall go on living, and it is important that we add to our store of knowledge'

"'Very well, I shall tell you, although perhaps I myself do not wholly understand why I did it It seems to me that I killed her because she repulsed me And I had need of her'

"'But she was not yours,' they said to him

"'And do you make use of only those things which are yours? I see that each man has nothing but arms and legs

and a tongue to speak with And yet he owns cattle and women and land and many other things'

"To this they replied that a man must pay for whatever he takes possession of—pay with his mind or his strength or even his life

"He said that he had no wish to pay

"When they had spoken to him for some time they saw that he considered himself above everyone else, that indeed he had no thought for anyone but himself And they were horrified when they realised that he had isolated himself from the whole world He had neither tribe nor mother nor cattle nor wife, nor did he wish to have any of these things

"And, seeing this, they again discussed what might be a fitting punishment for him But they had not spoken long before that same wise man, who until this moment had taken no part in the discussion, said

"'Wait A punishment has been found, and a dreadful one it is In a thousand years you could not think of anything to equal it His punishment lies in himself Unbind him and let him go free That will be his punishment'

"And then a wonderful thing happened A bolt of thunder struck out of a cloudless sky In this way the heavenly powers confirmed the decision of the wise man Everyone accepted it, and, having done so, they went away And the youth, who was henceforth named Larra, meaning the despised and rejected—the youth laughed at the people who had rejected him, laughed loudly on finding himself alone and as free as his father had been But his father had not been a man, whereas he was. Yet he began to live as free as a bird He stole cattle and maidens and anything else he wished from the tribesmen They shot arrows at him, but they could not pierce his body, protected as it was by the invisible armour of the highest punishment He was adroit, rapacious, strong and cruel, and never did he meet people face to face They only saw him from a distance. Thus for a long time did he hover alone at the edge of human communities—for a long, long time And then one day he crept close to a settlement, and when the people rushed out

to attack him, he remained where he was and did not try to defend himself Then one of the men guessed his intention and cried out

"'Do not touch him! He is seeking death!'

"And the people stayed their hands, not wishing to kill him and thereby bring relief to one who had wronged them so They stayed their hands and laughed at him And he shuddered at the sound of their laughter, and he clutched at his breast, as if searching for something there. And suddenly he hurled himself at the people, a stone in his hand But they dodged his blows and did not hit him in return, and when at last, exhausted, he let out a cry of despair and threw himself down on the ground, they withdrew and stood watching him They saw him struggle to his feet and pick up a knife that had been dropped in the scuffle and strike himself in the breast with it But the knife broke in two as if it had struck upon stone And again he threw himself down on the ground and beat his head against it, but the earth, too, withdrew from him, leaving a hollow where his head struck

"'He cannot die!' cried the people in joy

"And they went away and left him He lay on his back gazing up into the sky, and he saw the black dots of mighty eagles soaring far, far away And there was enough misery in his eyes to sadden the whole world From that time to this he has been alone, at large, waiting for death He does nothing but wander over the earth You yourself have seen how like a shadow he has become, and like a shadow he will remain till the end of time He understands nothing, neither human speech nor actions, he just roams on and on, forever in search of something He cannot be said to live, and yet he is unable to die And there is no place for him among men Just see what a man's pride can bring him to!"

The old woman heaved a sigh, and once or twice she gave an odd shake of her head, which had fallen on her breast

I looked at her Sleep, it seemed, was overpowering her, and for some reason I felt sorry for her She had ended her

story in an exalted, admonishing tone, and yet I had detected a note of fear and servility in it.

The people down by the sea were singing, and singing in an unusual way The tune was begun by a contralto, who sang only two or three notes before a second voice took it up from the beginning while the first carried it forward A third, fourth and fifth voice joined in the same way, and suddenly this same tune was begun by a chorus of men's voices

Each of the women's voices was heard separately, and they were like streams of different colours tumbling over rocks, leaping and sparkling as they rushed to join the rising swell of men's voices, were drowned in it, darted up out of it, drowned it out in their turn, and again, one by one, separated themselves from the heavier stream and soared, clear and strong, into the heights

The sound of the surf could not be heard for the singing

"Have you ever heard such singing before?" asked Izergil, raising her head to give me a toothless smile.

"No, I have not Not anywhere "

"And you never will We love to sing Only a handsome race can sing well—a handsome race that is filled with love of life We are such a race Look, think you those people who are singing are not weary from the day's labour? They laboured from sunrise to sunset, but now that the moon has risen they are singing People with no interest in life would have gone to bed, but those who find life sweet are singing "

"But their health—" I began

"One always has enough health to last a lifetime Health! If you had money, would you not spend it? Health is much like gold Do you know how my youth was spent? I wove rugs from dawn till dusk, scarcely unbending my back I, who was as full of life as a ray of sunlight, had to sit as motionless as a stone Sometimes my very bones ached from sitting so long But when evening came I ran off to embrace the man I loved For the three months that my love lasted I

ran to him and spent all my nights with him Yet see to what a great old age I have lived! The blood in my veins was sufficient, it seems How often I fell in love! How many kisses I gave and took!"

I looked into her face Her black eyes were still dull, not even her memories could restore their shine The moon poured light on her dry, cracked lips, on her sharp chin tufted with grey hairs, and on her wrinkled nose that was curved like the beak of an owl There were dark hollows where her cheeks had been, and in one of them lay a strand of grey hair that had escaped from under the red rag she had twisted round her head A web of wrinkles covered her face, neck, and hands, and at every movement she made I expected this parchment-like skin to split and peel off, leaving a bare skeleton with dull black eyes sitting beside me

Once more she began to talk in her cracked voice

"I lived with my mother near Falmi, on the banks of the Birlat River, and I was fifteen years old when he came to our farm He was tall and dark and graceful and very gay He stopped his boat under our window and called out in a ringing voice 'Hullo! Can I get some wine and something to eat here?' I looked out of the window, and through the branches of the ash-tree I saw the river all blue in the moonlight, and him standing there in a white blouse tied with a wide sash, one foot in the boat, the other on the bank And he was rocking the boat and singing, and when he caught sight of me he said 'Just see what a fair maid lives here, and I knew nothing of it!'—as if he knew all the other fair maids in the world I gave him some wine and some pork, and four days later I gave myself to him Every night he and I went boating together He would come and whistle softly, like a marmot, and I would jump out of the window like a fish on to the river-bank And off we would go He was a fisherman from the Prut, and when my mother found out about us and beat me, he urged me to run away to Dobruja with him and even further—to the tributaries of the Danube But I had grown tired of him by then—he never did anything but sing and make love I found it boring And

just at that time a band of Gutsuls came roaming through these parts and they found sweethearts for themselves here Those maids had a merry time of it! Sometimes one of the lovers would disappear, and his sweetheart would pine away, sure that he had been put in prison or killed in a fight, and then, lo and behold! he would drop out of a clear sky, alone or with two or three comrades, bringing rich gifts (they came by their riches easily) And he would feast with her, and boast of her to his comrades And this would give her pleasure Once I asked a girl who had such a lover to introduce me to the Gutsuls Just a moment, what was that girl's name? I have forgotten My memory has begun to fail me But it happened so long ago, anyone would forget Through this girl I met a young Gutsul He was handsome. A red-head Red hair and red whiskers Flaming red At times he was moody, at others tender, and again he would roar and fight like a wild beast Once he struck me in the face I sprang up on his chest like a cat and sank my teeth into his cheek From then on he had a dimple in his cheek, and he liked me to kiss him on that dimple "

"But what happened to the fisherman?" I asked

"The fisherman? He stayed on He joined their band—the Gutsuls At first he begged me to come back to him and threatened to throw me into the river if I did not, but he soon got over it. He joined their band and found himself another sweetheart. They were both hanged together—the fisherman and my Gutsul lover I went to see them hanged In Dobruja. The fisherman was deathly pale and wept when he went to his death, but the Gutsul smoked his pipe He walked straight ahead, smoking his pipe, his hands in his pockets, one of his moustaches sweeping his shoulder, the other his chest When he caught sight of me, he took the pipe out of his mouth and cried out 'Farewell!' I wept for him a whole year They had been caught just when they were ready to go back to their native mountains. They were holding a farewell party at the house of a certain Rumanian when they were captured Just the two of them Several others were killed on the spot and the rest escaped

But the Rumanian was made to pay for what he had done His farm and his mill and his barns of grain were burnt to the ground He became a beggar "

"Did you do it?" I hazarded a guess

"The Gutsuls had many friends—I was not the only one Whoever was their best friend did this in their memory "

The singing on the sea-shore had ceased by this time, and no other sound but the murmur of the waves accompanied the old woman's tale Their murmur, restless and brooding, was fitting accompaniment to this tale of a turbulent life Milder grew the night, deeper the blue of the moonshine, and softer the undefinable sound of night's invisible denizens, whose clamour was drowned out by the increasing roar of the sea as the wind rose

"And then there was a Turk I fell in love with I was one of his harem in Scutari For a whole week I lived there without minding it, but then I found the life tiresome Nothing but women everywhere He had eight of them All day long they ate and slept and chattered nonsense Or they quarrelled, and then they were like a set of cackling hens The Turk was not a young man His hair was almost white, and he was very rich and important. He spoke like an emperor His eyes were black and straight—I mean they looked straight into your soul And he was always praying I first saw him in Bucharest He was strutting about the bazaar like a king, looking very important I smiled at him That same evening I was seized in the street and brought to him He traded in sandal and palm wood and had come to Bucharest to make purchases of some sort

"'Will you go away with me?' he asked

"'I will indeed,' I said

"'Very well,' he said

"And I went away with him He was very rich He had a son, a slim dark-haired youth of sixteen It was with him I ran away from the Turk—ran away to Bulgaria, to Lom-Palanka There a Bulgarian woman knifed me in the chest because of her husband or lover, I have forgotten which

"For a long time after that I lay ill in a nunnery A Polish

girl, a nun, took care of me, and her brother, a monk from a monastery near Artzer-Palanka, used to come to see her He kept wriggling round me like a worm, and when I got well I went off with him to Poland "

"But wait· what happened to the Turkish boy?"

"Oh, him? He died He pined away with homesickness, or perhaps it was love He began to wilt like a sapling that has too much sun Just withered away I remember him lying there blue and transparent as ice, yet consumed by the flames of love He kept asking me to bend over and kiss him I loved him dearly and kissed him a lot Little by little he became so weak he could hardly move He would just lie there and beg me, as if he were begging alms, to lie down beside him and warm his poor body And I did The minute I lay down beside him he would be all aflame One day I woke up to find him stone-cold He was dead I wept over him Who can tell? Perhaps it was I who had killed him I was twice his age and very strong and vigorous, but he?—he was just a child "

She sighed and crossed herself—I had not seen her do that before Three times she made the sign of the cross, muttering something between her dry lips

"So you went off to Poland—" I prompted

"I did, with that little Pole He was beastly and absurd. When he wanted a woman, he would rub up against me like a tom-cat, the honey oozing between his lips, when his desire was satisfied he would lash me with his tongue as with a knout. One day when we were walking along the bank of a river, he said something proud and insulting Oh, I was angry! I seethed like boiling pitch I picked him up like a baby—he was very small—and squeezed him until he went black in the face Then I swung out and hurled him over the bank into the river He gave a shout, and it sounded very funny From the top of the bank I watched him struggling in the water, and then I went away and I have never seen him since I was lucky in that respect I never met my lovers after I had left them It would be bad to meet them—like meeting the dead "

The old woman grew silent In my mind's eye I saw the people her tale had conjured up I saw her Gutsul lover with the flaming-red hair and moustache calmly smoking his pipe as he went to his death His eyes, it seemed to me, were a cold blue, and their glance was firm and intense Beside him walked the dark-whiskered fisherman from the Prut Loath to die, he was weeping, and his once merry eyes stared dully out of a face that had grown white in the anticipation of death, while his tear-drenched moustaches drooped mournfully at the corners of his twisted mouth I saw the important old Turk who was no doubt a fatalist and a despot, and beside him his son, a pale delicate flower of the Orient, poisoned by kisses. And the conceited Pole, polite and cruel, eloquent and cold And all of them now were but wan shades, and she whom they had kissed so ardently was sitting beside me, still alive but shrivelled with age—bloodless, fleshless, with a heart bereft of all desire and eyes bereft of their shine—almost as much of a shade as they themselves.

She continued

"I found it hard to live in Poland The people there are false and cold-blooded And I could not speak their snake-like tongue that does nothing but hiss Why do they hiss? God gave them a snake-like tongue because they are so false And so I set off, I knew not for where, and saw the Poles getting ready to rise up against you Russians [1] I came to the town of Bochnia There a certain Jew bought me, not for himself, but to trade with my body I agreed to this One has to know how to do something if he is to earn a living, I did not know how to do anything, and I paid for it with my body But I resolved that if I could get enough money to take me back to my native town on the Birlat, I would break my bonds, however fast they were I could not complain of my life there Rich gentlemen came and feasted with me That cost them big sums. They fought with each other over me and were brought to ruin One of them tried for a long time to win my heart, and at last this is what he did he came with his servant, who was carrying a big sack, and he

emptied the sack over my head Gold coins came showering down over me and it cheered my heart to hear their ring as they struck the floor And yet I turned the man out. He had a fat greasy face and his belly was as puffy as a pillow. He looked like a stuffed pig Yes, I turned him out, even though he told me he had sold all his land and his house and his horses to bring me that gold But by that time I was in love with a worthy gentleman with a scarred face His face was criss-crossed with scars left by Turkish sabres He had just come back from helping the Greeks fight the Turks [2] There was a man for you! What were the Greeks to him, a Pole? Yet he went and helped them fight their enemy The Turks marred him cruelly—under their blows he lost an eye and two fingers of the left hand What were the Greeks to him, a Pole? Yet he fought for them, and he did this because he yearned to do brave deeds, and when a man yearns to do brave deeds, he will always find an opportunity Life is full of such opportunities, and if a man does not find them, it is because he is lazy or cowardly or does not understand life, for if he understands, he is sure to want to leave some memory of himself behind him And if everyone wished to do this, life would not gobble people up without leaving a trace of them A very fine man he was, he with the scarred face He would have gone to the ends of the earth to do a good deed I am afraid your people killed him in the uprising Why did you go to fight the Magyars?[3] But hush, say nothing "

And admonishing me to hold my tongue, old Izergil herself grew silent and thoughtful.

"I knew a certain Magyar One day he left me—it was in the depths of winter—and in the spring, when the snow melted, they found him in a field with a bullet through his head As many people die of love as of the plague—quite as many, if they were to be counted But what was I talking about? Ah, yes, about Poland It was there I played my last game I happened to meet a gentleman who was very handsome, devilishly handsome But by that time I was old

Ugh, so old! I must have been forty by then—at least forty And he was proud and had been pampered by the women That affair cost me dear He thought I would be his for the asking, but I did not give myself up so easily Never had I been the slave of anyone, and by that time I had broken off with the Jew, bought my freedom for a pretty sum I was living in Cracow in fine style, with horses and gold and servants and everything else I wanted He came to see me, the proud demon, and expected me to throw myself into his arms A pitched battle was fought between us. I grew haggard under the strain, for it lasted a long time, but at last I won He crawled on his knees before me But no sooner had he got me than he cast me off Then I knew I had grown old, and a bitter realisation it was. Very bitter I loved him, the fiend, and he would laugh in my face when he met me He was a beast And he would speak mockingly of me to others, and I knew it Oh, how I suffered! But there he was, in the same town, and I doted on him in spite of everything And then one day he went away to fight the Russians.[4] I could not bear it. I tried to take myself in hand, but I could not master my feelings. I decided to go to him He was stationed in a wood near Warsaw

"But when I got there I found out that your soldiers had beaten them and he had been taken prisoner and was being held in a village not far away

"'In other words, I shall never see him again!' I thought to myself And I wanted desperately to see him So I thought of a way to do so I dressed myself as a beggar-woman, pretended to be lame, covered my face, and set out for the village where he was imprisoned I found it full of soldiers and Cossacks, it cost me dear to stay there When I found out where the Poles were, I realised it would be very hard to reach them But reach them I must And so one night I set out. As I was crawling between the beds of a vegetable garden I saw a sentry standing in front of me I could hear the Poles singing and talking in loud voices. They were singing a song to the Virgin, and my Arkadek was singing with them And I remembered with bitterness that once men

had crawled after me, and now here was I crawling like a worm after a man, perhaps crawling to my death The sentry had pricked up his ears and was leaning forward What was I to do? I stood up and went towards him I did not have a knife or any other weapon with me—nothing but my hands and my tongue I was sorry I had not taken a knife with me The sentry levelled his bayonet at my throat, and I whispered 'Wait! Listen to what I have to say and spare my life if you have a heart in your breast I have nothing to offer you, but I beg your mercy' He lowered his gun and whispered 'Go away, old woman Go away What brings you here?' And I said that my son was imprisoned there 'My son, soldier, does that mean nothing to you? You, too, are somebody's son Then look at me and understand that I have a son like you, and that he is imprisoned here Let me have one look at him Perhaps he must die soon, and perhaps you, too, will be killed on the morrow Will your mother not shed tears over you? And will it not be hard for you to die without a last look at her, your mother? It will be just as hard for any son Take pity on yourself, and on him, and on me, his mother!'

"How long I stood there trying to persuade him! The rain poured down, drenching us The wind blew and wailed, buffeting me now in the back, now in the chest And I stood swaying in front of that stony-hearted soldier He kept saying 'no', and every time I heard that unfeeling word, the desire to see Arkadek flared up hotter within me As I talked I measured him with my eye—he was small and thin and had a cough At last I threw myself on the ground in front of him, and, still pleading with him, I seized him round the knees and threw him on the ground He fell in the mud Quickly I turned him face down and pressed his head into a puddle to keep him from crying out He did not cry out, but he struggled to throw me off his back I took his head in both hands and pushed it deeper into the puddle He was suffocated Then I rushed over to the barn where the Poles were singing 'Arkadek!' I whispered through a chink in the wall. They are sly fellows, those Poles, and so they did not

stop singing on hearing me But suddenly I saw his eyes opposite mine 'Can you get out of here?' I asked 'Yes, under the wall,' he said 'Then come quickly ' And so four of them crawled out of the barn, my Arkadek among them 'Where is the sentry?' asked Arkadek 'There he lies ' Then they crept away as quietly as possible, bent almost double The rain kept coming down and the wind wailed loudly We reached the end of the village and walked on through the woods for a long time without saying a word We walked quickly Arkadek held my hand in his, and his hand was hot and trembling Oh, how good it was to walk there beside him as long as he kept silent! They were my last moments—the last happy moments of an insatiable life! But at last we came to a meadow, and there we stopped All four of them thanked me for what I had done They talked on and on—I thought they would never stop—and as I listened to them I kept feasting my eyes on Arkadek How would he treat me now? And he put his arms about me and said something in a very pompous tone, I do not remember just what he said, but it was something to the effect that he would love me for having set him free, and he knelt before me and said with a smile 'My queen!' Ugh, what a false dog he was! I gave him a kick and would have slapped him in the face, but he leapt to his feet and sprang aside And he stood before me, very grim and white And the other three stood there looking sullen and saying not a word I stared back at them And I remember that a great weariness and indifference came over me And I said to them 'Go your way ' And they said to me, the dogs 'And will you go back and tell them in what direction we have gone?' That is what beasts they were But they went away And I, too, went away And on the next day your soldiers caught me, but they did not keep me long Then I realised it was time for me to make a home for myself—the life of a cuckoo was a thing of the past. My body had grown heavy, my wings feeble, my feathers dull I was old, I was old And so I went to Galicia, and from there to Dobruja For the last thirty years I have been living here I had a husband, a Moldavian, but he died about a year ago

And I go on living All alone No, not alone—with them—" and the old woman pointed to the waves They were no longer restless Now and again there would be a faint suggestion of sound that died away as soon as it was born

"They love me I tell them many tales, and they like them They are so young I feel happy with them I gaze at them and think 'Time was when I was as they are But in my day people had more strength and fire, and that made life gayer and more worth while It did indeed '"

She relapsed into silence again I felt sad, sitting there beside her Soon she dozed off, nodding her head and muttering something, perhaps a prayer, under her breath

A dark cloud with the jagged outlines of a mountain range rose out of the sea and moved towards the steppe Wisps were torn off its highest tip and went flying ahead, putting out the stars one by one The sea murmured A sound of kissing, of whispering, and of sighing came from the vineyard not far away A dog howled out in the steppe The air was filled with a strange odour that pricked the nostrils and made one's nerves tingle The clouds cast dark clusters of shadow which crept over the earth, now fading, now growing sharply distinct Nothing remained of the moon but a vague opalescent glow that at times was completely blotted out by a bit of cloud Tiny blue lights flickered far out in the steppe, which now had become dark and lowering, as if something fearful were lurking there The lights flared up as if people were wandering over the steppe in search of something, lighting matches which the wind instantly blew out They were very strange, those blue lights, and suggested the fantastic

"Do you see any sparks out there?" asked Izergil

"Those little blue lights?" said I, pointing out to the steppe

"Blue? Yes, those little lights So they are still to be seen! But not by my eyes There are many things I do not see any more "

"Where do they come from?" I asked the old woman

I had already heard one explanation of them, but I wanted to hear what old Izergil would say

"They come from the flaming heart of Danko Once upon a time there was a heart that broke into flame And those sparks are what is left of it I shall tell you that tale It, too, is old Everything is old See how many fine things there were in the old days! Today there is nothing—no men, no deeds, no tales—that can be compared with those of olden times Why is that so? Come, tell me Ah, you cannot What do you know? What do any of you young people know? If you searched the past you would find the answer to all life's riddles But you do not, and so you know nothing Think you I do not see what is happening? I see only too well, even if my eyes have grown weak And I see that instead of living, people spend their whole lives getting ready to live And when they have robbed themselves by wasting all that time, they blame it on fate What has fate to do with it? Each man is his own fate There are all sorts of people in the world today, but I see no strong ones among them What has become of them? And the handsome ones are growing fewer and fewer "

The old woman stopped to reflect on what had become of the strong and the handsome, and as she mused she gazed out into the dark steppe, as if searching for the answer there.

I waited in silence until she should begin her tale fearing that any comment would distract her

And presently she began

3 "Long, long ago there lived a tribe of people in a place that was bounded on three sides by impenetrable forests and on the fourth by the steppe They were a strong, brave and cheerful people, but evil times came upon them Other tribes came warring against them and drove them into the depths of the forest The forest was dark and swampy, for it was very ancient, and the boughs of the trees were so closely interwoven that they shut out the view of the sky, and the sun's rays had all

they could do to pierce the thick foliage and reach the waters of the swamp And wherever they reached those waters, poisonous vapours arose, and the people began to take sick and die Then the women and children of that tribe began to weep, and the men brooded on what had happened and grew despondent There was nothing for it but to get out of the forest, but there were only two ways of getting out one of them was to go back over the road they had come, but at the end of this road strong and vicious foes awaited them, the other was to push forward through the forest, but here they would come up against the giant trees whose mighty branches were closely entwined and whose gnarled roots were sunk deep into the mire of the bogs These stone-like trees stood silent and motionless in the grey gloom of daylight, and they seemed to close in upon the people at nightfall when the fires were lit. And always, day and night, this tribe, born to the freedom of the steppe, was walled in by shadows that seemed waiting to crush them Most fearful of all was the wind that went wailing through the tops of the trees, causing the whole forest to sing a grim dirge to the people imprisoned there They were, as I have said, a brave people, and they would have fought to the death with those who had once defeated them, had they not feared being wiped out in the fight they had their forefathers' behests to defend, and if they perished, their behests would perish with them And for that reason they sat pondering their fate through the long nights, with the poisonous vapours rising all around them and the forest singing its mournful song And as they sat there, the shadows of the fires leaped about them in a soundless dance, and it seemed as if it were not mere shadows that were dancing, but the evil spirits of forest and bog celebrating their triumph There the men sat brooding, and nothing, not even work or women, can exhaust a man as do despondent thoughts They grew weak from brooding Fear was born in their hearts, binding their strong arms, terror gripped them as they listened to the women wailing over the bodies of those who had died of the poisonous vapours, or lamenting over the fate of the living

made helpless by fear. And cowardly words came to be spoken in the forest—at first softly and timidly, but louder and louder as time went on And at last the people thought of going to the enemy and making him a gift of their freedom So frightened were they by the thought of death that not one of them shrank from living the life of a slave. But at this moment Danko appeared and saved them from such a fate "

The old woman, it seems, had often recounted this tale about the flaming heart of Danko As she intoned it in her hoarse crackling voice, I seemed to hear the sounds of the forest, in whose depths these unfortunate exiles were poisoned to death

"Danko was one of them, and he was young and handsome Handsome people are always courageous. And he said to his comrades

"'Stones are not to be removed by thinking He who does naught will come to naught. Why should we exhaust our energies thinking and brooding? Arise, and let us go through the forest until we come out at the other end, after all, it must have an end—everything has an end Come, let us set forth!'

"They looked at him and saw that he was the best man among them, for his eyes were aglow with life and strength

"'Lead us,' they said

"And he led them "

The old woman stopped talking and gazed out over the steppe, which was growing darker and darker Sparks from the flaming heart of Danko flared up in the distance like ethereal blue flowers that bloomed but for a moment

"And so he led them, Danko. And they followed him willingly, for they believed in him It was a difficult trek It was dark, and at every step the yawning bogs swallowed people up, and the trees were like a mighty wall barring the way Their branches were closely interwoven, their roots were like snakes reaching out in every direction, and every step these people took cost them blood and sweat For a long

time they went on, and the further they went, the thicker grew the forest and the weaker grew their limbs And then they began to murmur against Danko, saying that he was young and inexperienced and had no right to bring them here But he kept walking at their head, his spirit undaunted, his mind unclouded

"But one day a storm broke over the forest, and the trees whispered together menacingly And instantly it became as dark as if here were gathered all the nights that had passed since the forest was born And the little people walked on under the big trees amid the roar of the storm, and as they walked the giant trees creaked and sang a sinister song, and the lightning flashed above the tree-tops, throwing a cold blue light over the forest for a brief instant, disappearing as quickly as it had appeared and striking terror into the hearts of the people And in the cold flashes of the lightning the trees seemed to be live things that were stretching out long gnarled arms and weaving them into a net to catch these people who were trying to escape from darkness And something cold and dark and fearsome peered at them through the dark foliage It was a difficult trek, and the people who had set out on it grew exhausted and lost heart But they were ashamed to admit their weakness, and so they poured out their anger and resentment on Danko, who was walking at their head They began to accuse him of being incapable of leading them

"They came to a halt, and, tired and angry, they began to upbraid him there in the quivering darkness, amid the triumphant roar of the storm

"'You are a despicable and evil creature who had brought us to grief,' they said 'You have exhausted us by leading us here, and for that you shall die'

"'You said "Lead us!" and I led you,' cried out Danko, turning to face them 'I have the courage to lead you, and that is why I undertook to do it. But you? What have you done to help yourselves? You have done nothing but follow me, without husbanding your strength for a longer march You merely followed me like a flock of sheep'

"His words only infuriated them the more

"'You shall die! You shall die!' they shrieked

"The forest roared and echoed their cries, and the lightning tore the darkness to shreds Danko gazed upon those for whose sake he had undertaken such great labour, and he saw that they were like wild beasts Many people were pressing about him, but he could detect no signs of humanity in their faces and he knew that he could expect no mercy from them Then resentment seethed in his breast, but it was quelled by compassion He loved these people, and he feared that without him they would perish And the flames of a great yearning to save them and lead them out on to an easy path leaped up in his heart, and these mighty flames were reflected in his eyes. And seeing this, the people thought he was enraged, they thought that was why his eyes flashed so And they instantly grew wary, like wolves, expecting him to throw himself against them, and they drew closer about him that they might seize him and kill him He saw what they were thinking, but the flames in his heart only flared up the brighter, for their thoughts added the oil of sorrow to the flames of his yearning

"And the forest went on singing its mournful song, and the thunder crashed, and the rain poured down

"'What else can I do to save these people?' cried out Danko above the thunder

"And suddenly he ripped open his breast and tore out his heart and held it high above his head

"It shone like the sun, even brighter than the sun, and the raging forest was subdued and lighted up by this torch, the torch of a great love for the people, and the darkness retreated before it and plunged, quivering, into a yawning bog in the depths of the forest And in their astonishment the people were as if turned to stone

"'Follow me!' cried Danko, and he rushed forward, holding his flaming heart high above his head to light the way

"And the people followed him as if under a spell And once more the forest began to murmur and wave its

tree-tops in wonder But its murmur was drowned out by the sound of running feet. The people were running ahead boldly and swiftly, lured on by the wonderful vision of the flaming heart. And even now there were those who perished, but they perished without tears and complaints. And Danko went on ahead of them, his heart flaming brighter and brighter

"And suddenly the forest in front of them parted, it parted to make way for them and then closed behind them, a mute and solid wall, and Danko and his followers plunged into a sea of sunlight and rain-washed air The storm was now behind them over the forest, while here the sun shone, the steppe throbbed with life, the grass was hung with diamond rain-drops and the river was streaked with gold It was evening, and the rays of the sunset painted the river as red as the blood which poured in a hot stream from the wound in Danko's breast.

"The brave Danko cast his eye over the endless steppe, cast a joyful eye over this land of freedom, and gave a proud laugh Then he fell down and died

"And his followers were so full of joy and hope that they did not notice he had died and that his brave heart was still flaming beside his dead body. But one timid creature noticed it and, fearing he knew not what, stamped on the flaming heart. It sent up a shower of sparks and went out

"And that is why blue sparks are always to be seen in the steppe before a thunder-storm "

As the old woman finished her beautiful tale, the steppe grew incredibly still, as if overawed by the strength of the brave Danko, who set fire to his own heart for the sake of his fellow-men and died without seeking the least reward for what he had done.

The old woman dozed off. And as I looked at her I wondered how many more tales and memories her mind contained. And I thought about the flaming heart of Danko and about the power of the human imagination, which has created so many beautiful and inspiring legends.

The wind blew the rags off the bony chest of old Izergil, who had fallen fast asleep by this time I covered up her old body and lay down on the ground beside her It was dark and still in the steppe Clouds floated slowly, wearily, across the sky, and the sea murmured softly, mournfully

1894

The blue southern sky was so obscured by dust that it had a murky look The hot sun stared down at the greenish sea as through a thin grey veil, and its rays found poor reflection in the water, churned up as it was by the strokes of oars, the propellers of steamers and the sharp keels of Turkish feluccas and other craft which ploughed the crowded harbour in all directions. The waves of the sea, crushed within their granite encasements by the enormous weights gliding over their surfaces, hurled themselves at the shore and the sides of the ships—hurled themselves growling and foaming, their flanks littered with all sorts of rubbish

The clang of anchor chains, the clash of the buffers of goods cars, the metallic wail of sheets of iron being unloaded on to paving-stones, the dull thump of wood against wood, the clatter of carts, the whistles of steamships rising from a wail to a shriek, the shouts of stevedores, seamen and customs guards—all this merged to form the deafening music of the working day which surged rebelliously in the sky above the harbour, while from the earth below new waves of sound kept rising to meet it—now a rumble that shook the earth, now a crash that rent the sultry air.

The granite, the steel, the wood, the paving-stones, the ships and the people—everything was enveloped in the mighty sounds of this impassioned hymn to Mercury But human voices could hardly be detected in the general chorus, so weak and even ridiculous were they And the people themselves, they whose efforts had given birth to all this sound, were ridiculous and pitiable, their ragged dirty bodies were bent double under the loads on their backs as they scurried hither and thither in the dust and the heat and the noise, and they were as nothing compared with the steel

leviathans, the mountains of merchandise, the clanging railway cars, and all the other things which they themselves had created The things of their own creating had enslaved them and robbed them of personality

The gigantic ships lying with steam up whistled and hissed and heaved great sighs, and every sound they uttered was filled with mocking contempt for the drab and dusty creatures crawling over their decks to load their deep holds with the products of their servile labour It made one laugh till the tears ran to see these long files of stevedores carrying thousands of poods of grain on their backs to be deposited in the iron bellies of the ships so that they themselves might earn a few loaves of bread to fill their own bellies A poem of bitter irony could be read in the contrast between these ragged sweating men, stupefied by the heat, the noise, and the exhausting labour, and the powerful machines these men had made and which stood radiating well-being in the sunlight—machines which, when all is said and done, had been set in motion not by steam but by the blood and muscles of those who made them

The noise was oppressive, the dust tickled the nose and got into the eyes, the heat scorched and enervated the body, and everything seemed tense, as if the end of endurance had been reached and catastrophe was imminent, a tremendous explosion that would clear the air so that men might breathe freely and easily And then silence would descend on the world and there would be no more dust and turmoil to deafen and irritate people and drive them mad, and the air of the town, of the sea, and of the sky would be fresh and clear and beautiful . . . .

Twelve measured strokes of a bell rang out When the last brassy vibrations had died away the savage music of labour was found to have subsided, and a minute later it turned into a mere rumble of discontent. Now the voices of the people and the plash of the sea were more audible It was the dinner hour

I When the stevedores stopped work and scattered over the docks in noisy groups to buy victuals from the vendors and find shady corners where they could squat on the pavement to take their meal, Grishka Chelkash put in an appearance He was well known to all the dockers, a confirmed drunkard, a bold and clever thief He was barefooted and bareheaded, had on a pair of threadbare corduroy trousers and a filthy cotton shirt with a torn collar that exposed a bony chest covered by brown skin The matted state of his iron-grey hair and the crumpled look of his lean and hawk-like face indicated that he had just waked up. A straw had become caught in his moustache, another in the stubble of his left cheek, while behind his ear he had stuck a sprig of linden Long and lanky and a bit stooped, he sauntered slowly down the cobbled street, turning his hooked nose from side to side and casting a glittering grey eye about him as he searched for someone among the dockers His long dark moustache kept twitching like a cat's, he held his hands behind his back and kept rubbing them together and twisting his crooked grasping fingers Even here, among hundreds of other roughs, he instantly attracted attention because of the resemblance to a steppe-hawk conveyed by his predatory leanness and aimful gait, which, like the flight of the bird of prey he resembled, concealed a tense alertness under an appearance of poised tranquillity

As he came up to a group of stevedores sitting in the shadow cast by a pile of coal baskets, a stocky young chap, with a blotched and vapid face and with scratches on his neck suggesting a recent fight, got up to meet him He fell into step beside Chelkash and said under his breath

"The packhouse guards have discovered two bales of cloth missing They're searching "

"So what?" Chelkash asked, calmly running his eyes over him

"What d'ye mean 'so what'? They're searching, I tell you "

"And you thought I might join in the search?"

Chelkash smiled and glanced at the packhouse

"Go to hell!"

The chap turned back

"Wait! Who gave you those beauty-marks? A pity to mess up your shop front like that! Seen Mishka?"

"Not for a long time," called back the chap as he joined his comrades.

Everybody who met Chelkash greeted him as an old acquaintance, but he, usually so cheery and biting, must have been out of sorts, for his replies were curt

From behind a pile of merchandise suddenly appeared a customs guard—dark-green, dusty, aggressively erect. He planted himself in front of Chelkash in a challenging pose, his left hand on the hilt of his dirk, his right reaching out for Chelkash's collar

"Halt! Where you bound?"

Chelkash retreated a step, lifted his eyes to the guard's red face and gave a cool smile.

The face, wily but good-natured, tried to assume a dread aspect the cheeks puffed out and turned purple, the brows drew together, the eyes rolled, and the effect on the whole was extremely comical

"I told you once to keep away from these docks if you didn't want me to smash your ribs in, and here you are again!" he roared

"Howdy, Semyonich! Haven't seen you for a long time," said the imperturbable Chelkash, holding out his hand

"I wouldn't cry if I didn't see you for another fifty years. Move on, move on "

But he shook the extended hand

"Here's what I wanted to ask," went on Chelkash, holding the guard's hand in steel fingers and shaking it in an intimate sort of way "Seen Mishka anywhere?"

"What Mishka? I don't know any Mishka. Move on, man, or the packhouse guard may see you and then—"

"The red-headed chap I worked with on the *Kostroma* last time," persisted Chelkash

"That you *thieved* with, you mean They've put him in hospital, that Mishka of yours—got his leg crushed by some iron Get out of here, I tell you, get out before I throw you out by the scruff of the neck "

"Listen to that, now! And you said you didn't know no Mishka What makes you so mean today, Semyonich?"

"None of your talk! Get out!"

The guard was getting angry, he glanced about him and tried to free his hand, but Chelkash held on to it as he looked at him calmly from under bushy eyebrows and went on talking

"What's the rush? Don't you want to have a nice little chat with me? How you getting on? How's the wife and kiddies? Well?" His eyes twinkled and his teeth flashed in a mocking grin as he added "Been wanting to drop in to see you for ever so long, but just can't seem to manage it It's the drink—"

"Drop it, I tell you! None of your joking, you lanky lubber I mean what I say. But maybe you're turning to house-breaking, or robbing people in the street?"

"Why should I? There's enough here to keep you and me busy a lifetime Honest there is, Semyonich But I hear you've snitched another two bales of cloth Watch out, or you'll find yourself in trouble yet!"

Semyonich trembled with indignation and the spittle flew as he tried to talk Chelkash let go of his hand and calmly strode off on his long legs to the dock gates The guard followed at his heels, cursing him roundly

Chelkash was in better spirits now; he whistled a tune through his teeth, thrust his hands into his pockets, and retarded his steps, tossing off well-aimed quips to right and left. He was paid in his own coin

"Just see what good care of you the bosses are taking, Grishka!" called out a stevedore who was stretched out on the ground with his comrades, taking a rest after their meal

"Semyonich's seeing I don't step on any nails in my bare feet," replied Chelkash.

They got to the gates Two soldiers ran their hands down Chelkash's clothes and pushed him out into the street

He crossed the road and sat down on the curbstone opposite a pub A line of loaded carts came thundering out of the dock gates, while a line of empty ones moved in the other direction, their drivers bouncing in their seats The docks belched forth a roar of sound and clouds of dust that stuck to the skin

Chelkash was in his element amid this mad welter He was anticipating a good haul that night, a haul that would cost him little effort but require a great deal of skill He did not doubt but that his skill was sufficient, and he screwed up his eyes with pleasure as he reflected on how he would spend all his banknotes the next morning He thought of his pal Mishka. He needed him badly, and here he had gone and broken his leg Chelkash cursed under his breath, for he feared he could not handle the job alone What would the weather be like? He glanced up at the sky, then down the street

Sitting on the pavement, his back against a hitching post some half a dozen paces away, was a young lad in a blue homespun shirt and trousers, with bast sandals on his feet and a torn brown cap on his head Beside him lay a small bundle and a haftless scythe wrapped in straw and neatly tied with string The lad was sturdy, broad-shouldered, fair-haired, his face was tanned by wind and sun, and he had large blue eyes that stared amiably at Chelkash

Chelkash bared his teeth, stuck out his tongue, made a frightful face and stared back with popping eyes

The boy blinked in astonishment at first, then he burst out laughing, calling out between spasms "Crazy as a loon!" Without getting up, he hitched along the curbstone to where Chelkash was sitting, dragging his bundle through the dust and allowing the tip of his scythe to clank over the cobbles

"Been on the booze, eh?" he said to Chelkash, giving a tug at his trousers.

"You're right, baby-face, you're right," confessed Chelkash with a smile He was instantly drawn to this wholesome

good-natured chap with eyes as clear as a baby's "Been haymaking?"

"Yes Made hay, but no money Times are bad You never saw so many people! They all come drifting down from the famine districts No point in working for such pay Sixty kopeks in the Kuban, think of that! They say they used to pay three or four rubles, or even five "

"Used to! They used to pay three rubles just to get a look at a Russian! That's how I earned a living ten years ago I'd come to a Cossack village 'Here I am, folks, an honest-to-God Russian!' They'd all crowd round, look me over, poke me, pinch me, oh-and-ah and pay me three rubles Give me food and drink besides and invite me to stay as long as I liked "

At first the boy opened wide his mouth, an expression of wondering admiration on his round face, but as he realised Chelkash was fabricating, he snapped his mouth shut, then burst out laughing again Chelkash kept a straight face, hiding his smile in his moustache

"A queer bird you are, talking big as if it was God's truth and me swallowing it But honest to goodness, it used to be—"

"Isn't that just what I was saying? It used to be—"

"Oh, come!" said the boy with a wave of his hand "What are you, a cobbler, or a tailor, or what?"

"Me?" Chelkash mused awhile and then said "I'm a fisherman "

"A fisherman? Think of that! So you catch fish, do you?"

"Why fish? The fishermen here don't only catch fish Mostly dead bodies, old anchors, sunken boats There's special fish-hooks for such things "

"Lying again Maybe you're one of those fishermen who sing

We cast our nets
Upon the shores,
In market stalls, in open doors.

"Ever met fishermen like that?" asked Chelkash, looking hard at the boy and grinning

"No, but I've heard about them "

"Like the idea?"

"Of people like that? Why not? At least they're free, they can do what they please "

"What's freedom to you? Do you hanker after freedom?"

"Of course What could be better than to be your own boss, go where you like and do what you like? Only you've got to keep straight and see that no millstones get hung round your neck Outside of that, go ahead and have a good time without a thought for anything save God and your conscience "

Chelkash spat contemptuously and turned away

"Here's what I'm up against," went on the boy "My father died without leaving anything much, my mother's old, the land's sucked dry What am I supposed to do? I've got to go on living, but how? God knows I have a chance to marry into a good family I wouldn't mind if they'd give the daughter her portion But they won't Her old man won't give her an inch of land So I'd have to work for him, and for a long time For years There you are If only I could lay hands on, say, a hundred and fifty rubles I'd be able to stand up to her father and say 'Do you want me to marry your Marfa? Are you giving land to her? You aren't? Just as you say, she's not the only girl in the village, thank God ' I'd be independent, see? and could do what I liked " The boy heaved a sigh "But it looks as if there was nothing for it but to go and slave for him as his son-in-law I thought I'd bring back a couple of hundred rubles from the Kuban That would be the thing! Then I'd be my own master! But I didn't earn a damn thing Nothing for it but to be a farm-hand Can't do anything with my own land So there you are "

The boy squirmed and his face fell at the prospect of slaving for that man

"Where you bound now?" asked Chelkash

"Home Where else?"

"How do I know? Maybe you're bound for Turkey "

"Turkey?" marvelled the boy "What honest Christian would ever go to Turkey? A fine thing to say!"

"You *are* a blockhead," murmured Chelkash, turning away again Yet this wholesome village lad had stirred something in him, a vague feeling of dissatisfaction was slowly taking form within him, and this kept him from concentrating his mind on the night's task

The boy, offended by Chelkash's words, muttered to himself and threw sidelong glances at the older man His cheeks were puffed up in a droll way, his lips were pouting and his narrowed eyes blinked rapidly Evidently he had not expected his talk with this bewhiskered ruffian to end so suddenly and so unsatisfactorily

But the tramp paid no more attention to him His mind was on something else as he sat there on the curbstone whistling to himself and beating time with a dirty toe.

The boy wanted to get even with him

"Hey, you fisherman! Do you often go on a bout?" he began, but at that moment the fisherman turned to him impulsively and said

"Look, baby-face, would you like to help me to do a job tonight? Make up your mind, quick!"

"What sort of job?" asked the boy dubiously

"'What sort'! Whatever sort I give you We're going fishing You'll row "

"Oh, I wouldn't mind doing that, I'm not afraid of work Only—what if you get me into trouble? You're a queer egg, there's no seeing inside you "

Chelkash felt as if his insides had been scalded

"Don't go about shooting your mouth off," he said with cold animosity "Maybe a good crack over the head will help you see "

He jumped up, his eyes flashing, his left hand pulling at his moustache, his right clenched in a hard and corded fist

The boy was frightened He glanced quickly about him and then he, too, jumped up, blinking nervously The two of

them stood there silently measuring each other with their eyes

"Well?" said Chelkash harshly He was seething inside, twitching all over from the insult taken from this puppy he had held in such contempt so far, but whom he now hated with all his soul because he had such clear blue eyes, such a healthy tanned face, such short sturdy arms, because he had a native village and a house there, and an offer to be the son-in-law of a well-to-do muzhik, he hated him for the way he had lived in the past and would live in the future, but most of all he hated him because he, a mere child as compared with Chelkash, dared to hanker after a freedom he could neither appreciate nor have need of It is always unpleasant to discover that a person you consider beneath you loves or hates the same things you do, thereby establishing a certain resemblance to yourself

As the lad looked at Chelkash he recognised in him a master

"I don't really—er—mind," he said "After all, I'm looking for work What difference does it make whether I work for you or somebody else? I just said that because—well, you don't look much like a workingman You're so—er—down at heel But that can happen to anybody, I know God, haven't I seen drunks before? Plenty of them, some even worse than you "

"All right, all right So you're willing?" said Chelkash in a milder tone

"With pleasure State your price "

"The price depends on the job How much we catch Maybe you'll get five rubles."

Now that the talk was of money, the peasant wanted to be exact and demanded the same exactness from the man who was hiring him Once more he had his doubts and suspicions

"That won't suit me, brother "

Chelkash played his part.

"Don't let's talk about it now Come along to the tavern "

And they walked down the street side by side, Chelkash twirling his moustache with the air of a master, the lad fearful and distrusting, but willing to comply

"What's your name?" asked Chelkash

"Gavrilla," answered the lad

On entering the dingy, smoke-blackened tavern, Chelkash went up to the bar and in the off-hand tone of a frequenter ordered a bottle of vodka, cabbage soup, roast beef and tea, he repeated the list and then said nonchalantly "On tick," to which the barman replied by nodding silently This instantly inspired Gavrilla with respect for his employer, who, despite his disreputable appearance, was evidently well known and trusted

"Now we'll have a bite and talk things over Sit here and wait for me; I'll be right back "

And he went out. Gavrilla looked about him The tavern was in a basement, it was dark and damp and filled with the stifling smell of stale vodka, tobacco smoke, pitch, and something else just as pungent. A drunken red-bearded sailor smeared all over with pitch and coal-dust was sprawling at a table opposite him Between hiccups he gurgled a song made of snatches of words which were all sibilant one minute, all guttural the next Evidently he was not a Russian

Behind him were two Moldavian women. Swarthy, dark-haired, ragged, they too were wheezing out a drunken song

Out of shadows loomed other figures, all of them noisy, restless, dishevelled, drunken

Gavrilla was gripped by fear If only his boss would come back! The noises of the tavern merged in a single voice, and it was as if some huge many-tongued beast were roaring as it vainly sought a means of escape from this stone pit Gavrilla felt a depressing intoxication slowly creeping over him, making his head swim and his eyes grow hazy as they roved the tavern with fearful curiosity

At last Chelkash came back and the two men began to eat and drink and talk Gavrilla was drunk after his third glass

of vodka He felt very gay and was anxious to say something nice to this prince of a chap who had treated him to such a fine meal But somehow the words that surged in his throat would not come off his tongue, suddenly grown thick and unwieldy

Chelkash looked at him with a condescending smile

"Stewed? Ekh, you rag! On five swigs How are you going to work tonight?"

"Ol' pal!" lisped Gavrilla "Don't be 'fraid I'll show you Gimme a kiss, c'mon "

"That's all right Here, take another guzzle "

Gavrilla went on drinking until he reached the point at which everything about him seemed to be moving up and down in rhythmic waves This was unpleasant and made him sick His face wore an expression of foolish solemnity Whenever he tried to say anything, his lips slapped together comically and garbled sounds came through them Chelkash twisted his moustache and smiled glumly as he gazed at him abstractedly, his mind on something else.

Meanwhile the tavern was roaring as drunkenly as ever The red-headed sailor had folded his arms on the table and fallen fast asleep

"Time to go," said Chelkash, getting up

Gavrilla tried to follow him but could not, he let out an oath and laughed idiotically, as drunks do.

"What a wash-out!" muttered Chelkash, sitting down again

Gavrilla kept on laughing and looking at his boss with bleary eyes, while Chelkash turned a sharp and thoughtful eye on him He saw before him a man whose fate he held in his wolfish paw Chelkash sensed that he could do what he pleased with him He could crush him in his hand like a playing-card, or he could help him get back to the solid peasant way of life Conscious of his power over him, he reflected that this lad would never have to drink the cup it had been the fate of him, Chelkash, to drink He envied and pitied the boy, he despised him, and yet he was sorry to think that he might fall into other hands, no better than his

own In the end, Chelkash's various emotions combined to form a single one that was both fatherly and practical He pitied the boy and he needed him And so he took Gavrilla under the arms and lifted him up, giving him little pushes with his knee as he led him out into the tavern yard where he laid him down in the shade of a wood-pile, he himself sitting beside him and smoking his pipe Gavrilla tossed about awhile, gave a few grunts and fell asleep

2 "Ready?" whispered Chelkash to Gavrilla, who was fussing with the oars.

"In a minute The rowlock's loose. Can I give it a bang with the oar?"

"No! Not a sound! Push it down with your hands, it'll slip into place "

Both of them were noiselessly busy with a boat tied to the stern of one of a fleet of freight-boats loaded with oaken staves and of Turkish feluccas carrying palm and sandal wood and thick cyprus logs

The night was dark, heavy banks of tattered clouds floated across the sky, the sea was calm and black and as heavy as oil It gave off a moist saline odour and made tender little noises as it lapped at the shore and the sides of ships, causing Chelkash's boat to rock gently At some distance from shore could be seen the dark outlines of ships against the sky, their masts tipped by varicoloured lights. The sea reflected these lights and was strewn with innumerable yellow spots that looked very beautiful quivering upon the background of black velvet The sea was sleeping as soundly as a workman who has been worn out by the day's labour

"Let's go," said Gavrilla, dipping an oar into the water

"Let's." Chelkash pushed off hard with the steering oar, sending the boat into the lanes between the feluccas It glided swiftly over the water, which gave off a blue phosphorescent glow wherever the oars struck it and formed a glowing ribbon in the wake of the boat

"How's your head? Ache?" asked Chelkash solicitously.

"Something fierce. And it's heavy as lead Here, I'll wet it "

"What for? Wet your insides; that'll bring you round quicker," said Chelkash, holding out a bottle

"Ah, God be thanked "

There was a gurgling sound

"Hey! That's enough!" interrupted Chelkash

Once more the boat darted forward, weaving its way among the other craft swiftly and soundlessly Suddenly it was beyond them, and the sea—the mighty boundless sea—stretched far away to the dark-blue horizon, from which sprang billowing clouds grey-and-mauve with fluffy yellow edges, greenish, the colour of sea water and leaden-hued, throwing dark and dreary shadows Slowly moved the clouds across the sky, overtaking each other, merging in colour and form, dissolving, only to reappear again in new aspects, grimly magnificent There was something fatal in the slow movement of these inanimate forms. It seemed as if there were endless numbers of them at the rim of the sea, and as if they would go on crawling across the sky for ever, impelled by a vicious desire to keep the sky from gazing down upon the slumbering sea with its millions of golden orbs, the many-hued stars, that hung there alive and pensively radiant, inspiring lofty aspirations in the hearts of men to whom their pure shine was a precious thing

"Nice, the sea, isn't it?" asked Chelkash

"I suppose so, but it makes me afraid," said Gavrilla as he pulled hard and evenly on the oars. The water let out a faint ring and splash as the oars struck it, and it still gave off that blue phosphorescent glow

"Afraid! You *are* a boob," grunted Chelkash

He, a thief, loved the sea His nervous, restive nature, always thirsting for new impressions, never had enough of contemplating its dark expanses, so free, so powerful, so boundless. And he resented such a tepid response to his question about the beauty of the thing he loved As he sat there in the stern of the boat letting his steering oar cut

through the water while he gazed calmly ahead, he was filled with the one desire to travel as long and as far as he could over that velvety surface.

He always had a warm expansive feeling when he was at sea It filled his whole being, purging it of the dross of daily life. He appreciated this and liked to see himself a better man here among the waves and in the open air, where thoughts about life lose their poignancy and life itself loses its value. At night the soft breathing of the slumbering sea is wafted gently over the waters, and the sound fills the heart of man with peace, crams away its evil impulses, and gives birth to great dreams

"Where's the fishing tackle?" asked Gavrilla suddenly, glancing anxiously about the boat

Chelkash gave a start

"The tackle? I've got it here in the stern "

He did not wish to lie to this green youth and he regretted having his thoughts and feelings dispelled in this abrupt way It made him angry Again he had that burning sensation in his throat and chest and said to Gavrilla in a hard and impressive voice·

"Listen, sit where you are and mind your own business I hired you to row, so you row, and if you start wagging your tongue it will go hard with you Understand?"

The boat gave a little jerk and came to a halt, the oars dragging and stirring up the water Gavrilla shifted uneasily on his seat

"Row!"

A fierce oath shook the air Gavrilla lifted the oars and the boat, as if frightened, leaped ahead in quick nervous spurts that made the water splash.

"Steady!"

Chelkash half rose without letting go of the steering oar and fastened cold eyes on Gavrilla's white face He was like a cat about to spring as he stood there bent forward. The grinding of his teeth could be heard, as could the chattering of Gavrilla's teeth.

"Who's shouting there?" came a stern cry from out at sea.

"Row, you bastard! Row! Shhh! I'll kill you, damn your hide! Row, I tell you! One, two! Just you dare to make a sound! I'll rip you to pieces!" hissed Chelkash

"Holy Virgin, Mother of God!" murmured Gavrilla, trembling with fear and exertion

The boat swung round and went back to the harbour where the ships' lanterns formed clusters of coloured lights and their masts stood out distinctly

"Hi! Who's shouting?" came the cry again

But it came from a distance now. Chelkash was reassured.

"It's you who's shouting!" he called back, then turned to Gavrilla who was still muttering a prayer

"Luck's with you this time, lad If those devils had chased us it would have been all over with you I'd have fed you to the fishes first thing "

Seeing that Chelkash had calmed down and was in a good humour, the trembling Gavrilla pleaded with him

"Let me go, for the love of Christ, let me go Set me down somewheres. Oi, oi, oi, I've been trapped! For God's sake, let me go What do you want of me? I can't do this I've never been mixed up in such business It's the first time God, I'm lost for sure How did you get round me? It's a sin You'll pay for it with your soul Oh, what a business!"

"Business?" asked Chelkash sharply "What business?"

He was amused by the boy's terror, he took pleasure in contemplating it and in thinking what a ferocious fellow he himself was.

"Bad business, brother Let me go, for the love of God What do you need me for? Come, be a good chap—"

"Hold your tongue! If I didn't need you I wouldn't have brought you, understand? So shut up!"

"Dear God," murmured Gavrilla.

"Stop blubbering," Chelkash cut him off sharply

But Gavrilla could no longer control himself; he whimpered softly, coughed, sniffled, wriggled, but rowed

with a strength born of despair. The boat flew ahead like an arrow Once more they found themselves surrounded by the dark forms of ships Their boat became lost among them as it turned and twisted through the narrow lanes of water

"Listen, you! If you get asked any questions, keep your mouth shut if you value your life, understand?"

"God!" breathed Gavrilla, adding bitterly "I'm a lost man "

"Stop blubbering," whispered Chelkash again

This whisper robbed Gavrilla of his mental power, he was benumbed by a chill premonition of disaster Like one in a trance he dropped his oars into the water, threw himself backwards as he pulled, lifted them and dropped them again, his eyes fixed steadily on his bast sandals

The sleepy plash of the waves was dreary and terrifying Now they were in the docks. From the other side of a stone wall came the sound of human voices, of singing and whistling and a splashing of water

"Stop," whispered Chelkash "Put down your oars Push with your hands against the wall Shhh, damn you!"

Gavrilla guided the boat along the wall by holding on to the slippery masonry The boat moved without a sound, the slime on the stones deadening the sound of its bumping

"Stop Give me the oars, give them to me, I say Where's your passport? In your bundle? Let's have it Hurry up That's to keep you from running away, pal No danger of that now You might have run away without the oars, but not without your passport Wait here And mind, if you so much as squeak, I'll find you if it's at the bottom of the sea!"

And then, pulling himself up by his hands, Chelkash disappeared over the wall

It happened so quickly that Gavrilla gave a little gasp And then the heaviness in his heart and the fear inspired by that lean bewhiskered thief fell from him like a garment Now he would run away! Drawing a free breath, he glanced round To his left rose a black hull without a mast, a sort of gigantic coffin, empty and abandoned Every time the waves struck it, it let out a hollow sound that might have been a

groan To the left was the slimy wall of the breakwater, a cold heavy serpent uncoiled upon the sea Behind him loomed other dark forms, while ahead, in the opening between the wall and the coffin, he got a glimpse of the empty sea with black clouds banked above it Ponderous, enormous, they moved slowly across the sky, spreading horror in the darkness, threatening to crush human beings with their great weight Everything was cold, black, sinister Gavrilla was frightened And his present fear was greater than that inspired by Chelkash It clamped him tightly round the chest, squeezing all resistance out of him and pinning him to his seat

Everything was quiet Not a sound was to be heard but the sighing of the sea The clouds moved as slowly and drearily as ever, and so many of them rose out of the sea that the sky was like a sea itself, an agitated sea turned upside down over this smooth, slumbering one The clouds were like waves whose foamy crests were rushing down upon the earth, rushing back into the chasms out of which they had sprung, rushing upon the new-born billows which had not yet broken into the greenish foam of savage fury

So oppressed was Gavrilla by the austere silence and beauty about him that he was anxious to have his master come back What if he should not come? Time dragged slowly—slower than the movement of the clouds across the sky And the longer he waited, the more menacing grew the silence But at last a splash, a rustle, and something like a whisper came from the other side of the breakwater Gavrilla felt that he would die in another minute

"Hullo! Asleep? Here, catch this. Careful," came the muffled voice of Chelkash

Something square and heavy was let down over the wall Gavrilla put it in the boat A similar bundle followed Then the lanky form of Chelkash slid down, the oars appeared, Gavrilla's bundle fell at his feet, and Chelkash, breathing hard, took his seat in the stern

Gavrilla gave a diffident smile of joy

"Tired?" he asked

"Ra-ther! Well, lay on the oars Pull with all your might You've earned a neat little sum Half the job's over, all you've got to do now is slip past those bastards and then—collect and go back to your Mashka I s'pose you've got a Mashka, haven't you?"

"N-no " Gavrilla was putting forth his best effort, his lungs working like bellows, his arms like steel springs The water gurgled under the boat and the blue ribbon in its wake was wider than before Gavrilla became drenched in sweat but he did not let up on the oars Twice that night he had a great fright, he did not wish to have a third one The only thing he wanted was to get this accursed job over as quickly as possible, set foot on dry land and escape from that man while he was still alive and out of jail He resolved not to talk to him, not to oppose him in any way, to do everything he ordered him to, and if he managed to get away safely, to say a prayer to St Nicholas the Miracle-Worker on the very next day An impassioned prayer was ready on his tongue, but he held it back, panting like a locomotive and glancing up at Chelkash from under drawn brows

Chelkash, long and lean, was crouching like a bird about to take wing, his hawk-like eyes piercing the darkness ahead, his hooked nose sniffing the air, one hand clutching the steering oar, the other pulling at his moustache, which twitched as his thin lips spread in a smile Chelkash was pleased with his haul, with himself, and with this youth whom he had terrorised and converted into his slave. As he watched Gavrilla exerting himself, he felt sorry for him and thought he would offer him a word of encouragement

"Aha!" he said softly, with a little laugh, "got a good scare, did you?"

"Not so bad," grunted Gavrilla

"You can take it easier now. The danger's over There's just one place more we've got to slip past Take a rest "

Gavrilla obediently stopped rowing, and dropped his oars into the water again

"Row softly Keep the water from talking There's gate we've got to get past Shhh The men here can't take a joke Always ready with their guns You'll have a hole in your head before you know what's struck you "

Now the boat was gliding through the water almost without sound The only sign of its movement was the blue shine of the water dripping off the oars and the blue sparkles in the sea as the drops struck it The night grew darker and stiller. The sky no longer resembled an agitated sea—the clouds had spread out to form a heavy blanket that hung low and immobile over the water The sea was even more calm and black, its warm saline odour was stronger than ever, and it no longer seemed so boundless

"If only it would rain!" murmured Chelkash "It would hide us like a curtain "

Great forms rose out of the water to right and left of the boat. They were barges—dark and dreary and motionless. On one of them a light could be seen moving someone was walking about with a lantern in his hand The sea made little pleading sounds as it patted the sides of the barges, and they gave chill and hollow answers, as if unwilling to grant the favours asked of them

"The cordon!" said Chelkash in a scarcely audible voice

Ever since he had told Gavrilla to row softly, the latter had again been filled with apprehension As he strained ahead into the darkness it seemed to him that he was growing—his bones and sinews ached as they stretched and his head ached, too, filled as it was with a single thought The skin of his back quivered and he had a sensation of pins-and-needles in his feet His eyes felt as if they would burst from straining so hard into the darkness, out of which he expected someone to rise up any minute and shout at them "Stop, thieves!"

Gavrilla shuddered on hearing Chelkash say· "The cordon " A dreadful thought flashed through his mind and struck upon his taut nerves he thought of calling out for help He even opened his mouth, raised himself a little and took a deep breath, but suddenly, struck with horror as

though with a lash, closed his eyes and slipped off the seat.

From out of the black waters rose a flaming blue sword of light, it rose and cleaved the darkness of night, cut through the clouds in the sky and came to rest on the bosom of the sea in a broad blue ribbon of light There it lay, its rays picking the forms of ships, hitherto unseen, out of the darkness—black silent forms, shrouded in the gloom of night. It was as if these ships had lain for long at the bottom of the sea, to which they had been consigned by the forces of the storm, and now, at the will of this flaming sword born of the sea, they had been raised, that they might gaze on the sky and on all things that exist above water The rigging of their masts was like clinging seaweed that had been brought up from the bottom of the sea along with the gigantic black forms it enmeshed as in a net Then once again this fearsome blue sword rose, flashing, off the bosom of the sea, and once again it cleaved the night and lay down again, this time in another spot. And again the forms of ships which had not been seen before were illuminated by its light

Chelkash's boat stopped and rocked on the water as if deliberating what to do Gavrilla was lying in the bottom of the boat, his hands over his face, while Chelkash poked him with his foot and whispered savagely

"That's the customs cruiser, you fool! And that's its spotlight. Get up They'll spot us in a minute You'll be the ruin of me and yourself as well, you idiot Get up!"

A particularly effective kick in the back brought Gavrilla to his feet Still afraid to open his eyes, he sat down, felt for the oars, and began to row

"Easy! Easy, damn you! God, what a fool I picked up! What you afraid of, snout-face? A lantern—that's all it is Easy with those oars, God damn you! They're searching for smugglers But they won't catch us They're too far out. Oh, no, they won't catch us. Now we're—" Chelkash looked about triumphantly, "—we're out of danger. Phew! Well, you're a lucky devil, even if you are a blockhead "

Gavrilla rowed on, saying nothing, breathing heavily, stealing sidelong glances at the flaming sword that kept rising and falling Chelkash said it was only a lantern, but he could not believe it. There was something uncanny about this cold blue light cleaving the darkness, giving the sea a silver shimmer, and once more Gavrilla was gripped by fear He rowed mechanically, all his muscles taut as in expectation of a blow from above, and there was nothing he wanted now, he was empty and inanimate The excitement of that night had drained everything human out of him

But Chelkash was jubilant His nerves, used to strain, quickly relaxed His moustache twitched with gratification and his eyes sparkled Never had he been in better humour, he whistled through his teeth, drew in deep breaths of the moist sea air, looked about him, and smiled good-naturedly when his eyes came to rest on Gavrilla

A wind sprang up, rousing the sea and breaking up the surface into little ripples The clouds grew thinner and more transparent but the whole sky was still covered with them The wind rushed lightly back and forth across the sea, but the clouds hung motionless, as if deeply engrossed in drab, uninteresting thoughts

"Come, snap out of it, brother You look as if you'd had all the spirit knocked out of you, nothing but a bag of bones left It's all over "

Gavrilla was glad to hear a human voice, even if it was Chelkash's

"I'm all right," he murmured

"You look it! Got no guts left Here, take the steering oar and let me row You must be tired "

Gavrilla got up mechanically and changed places with him In passing, Chelkash glanced at the boy's white face and noticed that his knees were trembling so that they could hardly hold him This made him more sorry than ever for him, and he gave him a pat on the shoulder

"Come, chin up! You did a good job I'll reward you well for it. What would you say if I handed you twenty-five rubles?"

"I don't want anything Nothing but to get ashore "

Chelkash gave a wave of his hand, spat, and began to row, swinging the oars far back with his long arms

The sea was quite awake now It amused itself by making little waves, ornamenting them with fringes of foam, and running them into each other so that they broke in showers of spray The foam hissed and sighed as it dissolved, and the air was filled with musical sounds The darkness seemed to have waked up, too

"So now," said Chelkash, "you'll go back to your village, get married, start working the land, grow grain, your wife will bear children, there won't be enough to eat, and all your life you'll work yourself to the bone What fun is there in that?"

"No fun at all," Gavrilla replied faintly and with a little shudder

Here and there the wind tore rifts in the clouds, revealing patches of blue sky set with one or two stars The reflection of these stars danced on the water, now disappearing, now gleaming again

"Bear more to the right," said Chelkash "We're almost there Hm, the job's over A big job Just think, five hundred in a single night!"

"Five hundred?" repeated Gavrilla incredulously Frightened by the words, he gave the bundles a little kick and said, "What's in them?"

"Things that are worth a lot of money They'd bring in a thousand if I got the right price, but I can't be bothered Slick, eh?"

"Good Lord!" said Gavrilla unbelievingly "If only I had as much!" He sighed as he thought of his village, his wretched farm, his mother, and all those dear and distant things for whose sake he had set out in search of work, for whose sake he had undergone the tortures of that night He was caught up in a wave of memories—his little village on the side of a hill running down to the river, and the woods above the river with its birches, willows, rowans, and bird cherry

"How I need it!" he sighed mournfully

"You don't say I s'pose you'd jump straight on a train and make a dash for home. And wouldn't the girls be mad on you! Why, you could have any one of them you liked And you'd build yourself a new house, although the money's hardly enough for a house "

"No, not for a house Timber's dear up our way "

"At least you'd repair the old one. And what about a horse? Have you got a horse?"

"Yes, but it's a feeble old thing "

"So you'll need to buy a new horse A first-rate horse And a cow . And some sheep And some poultry, eh?"

"Ekh, don't mention it! Couldn't I set myself up fine!"

"You could, brother. And life would be like a song I know a thing or two about such things myself I had a nest of my own once My father was one of the richest men in the village "

Chelkash was scarcely rowing The boat was rocked by the waves splashing mischievously against its sides, and it made almost no progress through the dark waters, now growing more and more playful The two men sat there rocking and looking about them, each absorbed in his own dreams Chelkash had reminded Gavrilla of his village in the hope of quieting the boy's nerves and cheering him up He had done so with his tongue in his cheek, but as he taunted his companion with reminders of the joys of peasant life, joys which he himself had long since ceased to value and had quite forgotten until this moment, he gradually let himself be carried away, and before he knew it he himself was expounding on the subject instead of questioning the boy about the village and its affairs.

"The best thing about peasant life is that a man's free, he's his own boss. He's got his own house, even if it's a poor one And he's got his own land—maybe only a little patch, but it's his. He's a king, once he's got his own land He's a man to be reckoned with He can demand respect from anybody, can't he?" he ended up with animation

Gavrilla looked at him curiously, and he, too, became animated In the course of their talk he had forgotten who this man was, he saw in him only another peasant like himself, glued fast to the land by the sweat of many generations of forefathers, bound to it by memories of childhood, a peasant who of his own free choice had severed connections with the land and with labour on the land, for which he had been duly punished

"True, brother How very true! Look at you, now, what are you without any land? The land, brother, is like your mother; there's no forgetting it "

Chelkash came back to earth Again he felt that burning sensation in his chest that always troubled him when his pride—the pride of a reckless dare-devil—was injured, especially if injured by someone he considered a nonentity

"Talking rot again!" he said fiercely "Did you think I meant what I said? Know your place, upstart!"

"But I didn't mean you," said Gavrilla with his former timidity "There's lots of others like you God, how many miserable people there are in the world! Homeless tramps "

"Here, take over the oars," snapped Chelkash, holding back the flood of oaths that surged in his throat

Once more they exchanged places, and as Chelkash climbed over the bundles he had an irresistible desire to give Gavrilla a push that would send him flying into the water

They did no more talking, but Gavrilla emanated the breath of the village even when he was silent. Chelkash became so engrossed in thoughts of the past that he forgot to steer, and the current turned the boat out to sea The waves seemed to sense that this boat was without a pilot, and they played with it gleefully, tossing it on their crests and leaping in little blue flames about the oars In his mind's eye Chelkash saw a kaleidoscope of the past, of the distant past, separated from the present by the gulf of eleven years of vagrancy He saw himself as a child, saw his native village, saw his mother, a stout red-cheeked woman with kindly grey eyes, and his father, a stern-faced, red-bearded giant. He

saw himself as a bridegroom, and he saw his bride, the plump black-eyed Anfisa with a mild, cheerful disposition and a long plait hanging down her back Again he saw himself, this time as a handsome Guardsman, again his father, now grey-haired and stooped with labour, and his mother wrinkled and bent to earth He saw the reception the village gave him when his army service was over, and he recalled how proud his father had been to show off this healthy, handsome, bewhiskered soldier-son to the neighbours. Memory is the bane of those who have come to misfortune, it brings to life the very stones of the past, and adds a drop of honey even to the bitterest potion drunk at some far time

It was as if a gentle stream of native air were wafted over Chelkash, bringing to his ears his mother's tender words, his father's earnest peasant speech and many other forgotten sounds, bringing to his nostrils the fragrance of mother-earth as it thawed, as it was new-ploughed, as it drew on an emerald coverlet of springing rye He felt lonely, uprooted, thrown once and for all beyond the pale of that way of life which had produced the blood flowing in his veins

"Hey, where are we going?" cried Gavrilla.

Chelkash started and glanced about with the alertness of a bird of prey

"Look where we've drifted, damn it all Row harder "

"Daydreaming?" smiled Gavrilla

"Tired "

"No danger of getting caught with them things?" asked Gavrilla, giving the bundles a little kick

"No, don't worry I'll turn them in now and get my money "

"Five hundred?"

"At least "

"God, what a pile! If only I had it! Wouldn't I play a pretty tune with it, just!"

"A peasant tune?"

"What else? I'd "

And Gavrilla soared on the wings of his imagination Chelkash said nothing His moustache drooped, his right side had been drenched by a wave, his eyes were sunken and lustreless. All the hawkishness had gone out of him, had been wrung out of him by a humiliating introspection that even glanced out of the folds of his filthy shirt

He turned the boat sharply about and steered it towards a black form rising out of the water

Once more the sky was veiled in clouds and a fine warm rain set in, making cheerful little plopping sounds as its drops struck the water

"Stop! Hold it!" ordered Chelkash.

The nose of the boat ran into the side of a barge

"Are they asleep or what, the bastards?" growled Chelkash as he slipped a boat-hook into some ropes hanging over the side "Throw down the ladder! And the rain had to wait till this minute to come down! Hey, you sponges! Hey!"

"Selkash?" purred someone on deck.

"Where's the ladder?"

"Kalimera, Selkash "

"The ladder, God damn you!"

"Oo, what a temper he's in tonight! Eloy!"

"Climb up, Gavrilla," said Chelkash to his companion.

The next minute they were on deck, where three bearded, dark-skinned fellows were talking animatedly in a lisping tongue as they stared over the gunwale into Chelkash's boat. A fourth, wrapped in a long chlamys, went over to Chelkash and shook his hand without a word, then threw Gavrilla a questioning look

"Have the money ready in the morning," Chelkash said to him briefly "I'm going to take a snooze now Come along, Gavrilla. Are you hungry?"

"I'm sleepy," said Gavrilla. Five minutes later he was snoring loudly while Chelkash sat beside him trying on somebody else's boots, spitting off to one side and whistling a sad tune through his teeth Presently he stretched out beside Gavrilla with his hands behind his head and lay there with his moustache twitching

The boat rolled on the waves, a board creaked plaintively, the rain beat on the deck and the waves pounded the sides of the boat It was all very mournful and reminded one of the cradlesong of a mother who has little hope of seeing her child happy

Chelkash bared his teeth, raised his head, glanced about him, muttered something to himself and lay down again with his legs spread wide apart, making him look like a pair of giant scissors

3

He was the first to wake up He glanced anxiously about him, was instantly reassured, and looked down at Gavrilla, who was snoring happily, a smile spread all over his wholesome, sunburnt, boyish face Chelkash gave a sigh and climbed up a narrow rope-ladder A patch of lead-coloured sky peered down the hatchway It was light, but the day was dull and dreary, as days often are in autumn

Chelkash came back in a couple of hours His face was red and his whiskers had been given a rakish twist He was wearing a sturdy pair of high-boots, a leather hunting jacket and breeches as a hunter wears The outfit was not new, but in good condition and very becoming to him, since it filled out his figure, rounded off the edges and gave him a certain military air

"Get up, puppy," said he, giving Gavrilla a little shove

Gavrilla jumped up only half-awake and gazed at Chelkash with frightened eyes, not recognising him Chelkash burst out laughing

"Don't you look grand!" said Gavrilla with a broad grin at last "Quite the gentleman "

"That don't take us long But you're a lily-livered fellow if there ever was one How many times were you about to pass out last night?"

"You can't blame me, I'd never been on a job like that before I might have lost my soul "

"Would you do it again, eh?"

"Again? Well, I can't say What would I get for it?"

"If you got, let's say, two smackers?"

"You mean two hundred rubles? I might "

"And what about losing your soul?"

"Maybe I wouldn't lose it after all," grinned Gavrilla "I mightn't lose it, and I'd be made for the rest of my life "

Chelkash laughed gaily

"Well, enough of joking, let's go ashore "

And so they found themselves in the boat again, Chelkash steering, Gavrilla rowing Above them stretched a solid canopy of grey clouds, the sea was a dull green and it played joyfully with the boat, tossing it up on waves that had not yet grown to any size, and throwing handfuls of pale spray against its sides Far up ahead could be glimpsed a strip of yellow sand, while behind them stretched the sea, chopped up into coveys of white-caps Behind them, too, were the ships—a whole forest of masts back there to the left, with the white buildings of the port as a background A dull rumble coming from the port mingled with the roar of the waves to form fine strong music And over everything hung a thin veil of fog that made all objects seem remote

"Ekh, it'll be something to see by nightfall!" exclaimed Chelkash, nodding out to sea

"A storm?" asked Gavrilla as he ploughed powerfully through the waves with his oars. His clothes were soaked with wind-blown spray

"Uh-huh," said Chelkash

Gavrilla looked at him inquisitively

"Well, how much did they give you?" he asked at last, seeing that Chelkash had no intention of broaching the subject.

"Look " Chelkash pulled something out of his pocket and held it out.

Gavrilla's eyes were dazzled by the sight of so many crisp bright bank-notes

"And here I was thinking you had lied to me! How much is it?"

"Five hundred and forty "

"Phe-e-w!" gasped Gavrilla, following the course of the notes back to the pocket with greedy eyes. "God! If only I had that much money!" and he gave a doleful sigh

"You and me'll go on a big spree, mate," cried Chelkash ecstatically "We'll paint the town red You'll get your share, never fear. I'll give you forty. That enough, eh? Give it straight away if you want me to "

"All right, I'll take it if you don't mind "

Gavrilla was shaking with anticipation

"Ekh, you scarecrow, you! 'I'll take it!' Here, go ahead and take it Take it, damn it all I don't know what to do with so much money Do me a favour and take some of it off my hands "

Chelkash held out several notes to Gavrilla, who let go of the oars to clutch them in trembling fingers and thrust them inside his shirt, screwing up his eyes as he did so and taking in great gulps of air as if he had burnt his throat Chelkash watched him, a mocking smile on his lips Once more Gavrilla picked up the oars and began to row nervously, hurriedly, with his eyes cast down, like a man who is afraid His shoulders and ears were twitching

"You're a greedy bloke That's no good But what's to be expected?—you're a peasant," mused Chelkash

"A man can do anything with money!" exclaimed Gavrilla in a sudden flare of excitement. And then hurriedly, incoherently, chasing his thoughts and catching his words on the fly, he drew the contrast between life in the village with money and without it. Honour, comfort, pleasure!

Chelkash followed him attentively, his face grave, his eyes narrowed thoughtfully. From time to time he would give a pleased smile

"Here we are!" he interrupted Gavrilla's tirade

The boat was caught on a wave that drove it into the sand

"Well, this is the end We've only got to pull the boat up good and high so that it don't get washed away. Some people

will come for it. And now it's good-bye We're about eight versts from town. You going back to town?"

Chelkash's face was beaming with a sly and good-natured smile, as if he were contemplating something very pleasant for himself and very unexpected to Gavrilla. He thrust his hand into his pocket and rustled the notes there

"No—I'm not going I'm—I'm—" Gavrilla stammered as if choking

Chelkash looked at him.

"What's eating you?" he said

"Nothing " But Gavrilla's face turned first red, then grey, and he kept shifting on his feet as if he wanted to throw himself at Chelkash or do something else of insuperable difficulty

Chelkash was taken aback by the boy's agitation. He waited to see what would happen next.

Gavrilla broke into laughter that sounded more like sobbing His head was hanging, so that Chelkash could not see the expression of his face, but he could see his ears going from red to white.

"To hell with you," said Chelkash with a disgusted wave of his hand "Have you fallen in love with me, or what? Squirming like a girl. Or maybe you can't bear to part with me? Speak up, spineless, or I'll just walk off "

"You'll walk off?" shrieked Gavrilla

The deserted beach trembled at the shriek, and the ripples of yellow sand made by the washing of the waves seemed to heave Chelkash set out All of a sudden Gavrilla rushed at him, threw himself at his feet, seized him round the knees and gave him a tug Chelkash staggered and sat down heavily in the sand, clenching his teeth, he swung up his long arm with the hand closed in a tight fist But the blow was intercepted by Gavrilla's pleadings, uttered in a cringing whisper:

"Give me that money, there's a good fellow! For the love of Christ give it to me What do you need with it? Look, in just one night—in one single night! And it would take me years and years. Give it to me I'll pray for you All my life.

In three churches For the salvation of your soul You'll only throw it to the winds, and I? I'll put it in the land Give it to me! What is it to you? It comes so easy One night, and you're a rich man Do a good deed once in your life After all, you're a lost soul, there's nothing ahead of you And I'd—oh what wouldn't I do with it! Give it to me!"

Chelkash—frightened, dumbfounded, infuriated—sat in the sand leaning back on his stiff arms, sat without a word, his eyes boring into this boy whose head was pressed against his knees as he gasped out his plea At last Chelkash jumped to his feet, thrust his hand into his pocket and threw the notes at Gavrilla

"Here, grab it!" he cried, trembling with excitement, with pity and loathing for this greedy slave He felt heroic when he had tossed him the money

"I was going to give you more anyway Went soft last night thinking of my own village Thought to myself I'll help the lad But I waited to see if you'd ask for it And you did, you milksop, you beggar, you Is it worth tormenting yourself like that for money? Fool Greedy devils No pride They'd sell themselves for five kopecks."

"May Christ watch over you! How I'm—you know what I am now? Why, I'm a rich man!" squealed Gavrilla, twitching all over in ecstasy and hiding the money inside his shirt "Bless you, my friend I'll never forget you Never And I'll have my wife and children say prayers for you, too "

As Chelkash heard his joyful squeals and looked at his beaming face distorted by this paroxysm of greed, he realised that, thief and drunkard that he was, he would never stoop so low, would never be so grasping, so lacking in self-pride. Never, never! And this thought and this feeling, filling him with a sense of his own freedom, made him linger there beside Gavrilla on the shore of the sea

"You've made me a happy man," cried Gavrilla, snatching Chelkash's hand and pressing it to his own face

Chelkash bared his teeth like a wolf but said nothing

"And just to think what I almost did!" went on Gavrilla "On the way here I thought—to myself—I'll hit him—you,

that is—over the head—with an oar—bang!—take the money—and throw him—you, that is—overboard Who'd ever miss him? And if they found his body—nobody'd bother to find out who did it and how He's not worth making a fuss over. Nobody needs him Nobody'd think twice about him "

"Hand over that money!" roared Chelkash, seizing Gavrilla by the throat

Gavrilla wrenched away once, twice, but Chelkash's arm wound about him like a snake The sound of a shirt ripping, and—there was Gavrilla flat on his back in the sand, his eyes popping out of his head, his fingers clutching the air, his feet kicking helplessly Chelkash stood over him lean, erect, hawklike, his teeth bared as he gave a hard dry laugh, his whiskers twitching nervously on his sharp bony face Never in all his life had he been wounded so cruelly, and never had he been so furious

"Well, are you happy now?" he laughed, then turned on his heel and set off in the direction of the town Before he had gone five steps Gavrilla arched himself like a cat, sprang to his feet, swung out with his arm and hurled a big stone at him

"Take that!"

Chelkash let out a grunt, put his hands to his head, staggered forward, turned round to Gavrilla, and fell on his face in the sand Gavrilla was frozen with fear Chelkash moved one leg, tried to lift his head, stretched out, trembling like a harp string Then Gavrilla ran for all he was worth, ran out into the dark space where a shaggy black cloud was hanging over the fog-enshrouded steppe. The waves rustled as they scurried up the sand and seeped through it. The foam hissed and the air was filled with spray

It began to rain At first it came down in single drops, but soon turned into a shower that came pouring out of the sky in thin streams These streams wove a net of watery threads that enveloped the whole expanse of the steppe, the whole expanse of the sea Gavrilla was swallowed up in it. For a

long time nothing was to be seen but the rain and the long figure of the man lying in the sand at the edge of the sea Then Gavrilla came swooping like a bird out of the darkness When he reached Chelkash he fell on his knees beside him and tried to lift him up His hand came in contact with something warm and red and sticky He shuddered and started back, with a wild expression on his white face

"Get up, brother, get up!" he whispered in Chelkash's ear above the noise of the rain

Chelkash opened his eyes and gave Gavrilla a little push

"Go away," he whispered hoarsely

"Brother! Forgive me! It was the devil's doings," whispered Gavrilla trembling as he kissed Chelkash's hand

"Go away Leave me "

"Take this sin off my soul Forgive me, brother "

"Away! Go away! Go to hell!" Chelkash suddenly cried out and sat up in the sand His face was white and angry, his eyes were hazy and kept closing as if he were sleepy "What else do you want? You've done what you wanted to do Go away Get out!" He tried to give the grief-stricken Gavrilla a kick, but he could not and would have collapsed again had not Gavrilla put an arm round his shoulders Chelkash's face was on a level with Gavrilla's. Both faces were white and dreadful to see

"Scum!" And Chelkash spat into the wide-open eyes of his companion

Gavrilla humbly wiped his face on his sleeve

"Do what you want to me," he whispered "I won't say a word Forgive me, in the name of Christ "

"Scum Can't even do your dirty work like a man," cried Chelkash scathingly as he slipped his hand inside his jacket and ripped off a piece of shirt with which he silently bound his head, grinding his teeth from time to time "Have you taken the money?" he asked through his teeth

"I haven't, brother And I won't I don't want it Nothing but bad luck comes of it "

Chelkash thrust his hand into a pocket of his jacket, pulled out the pile of notes, peeled off a hundred-ruble one,

put it back into his pocket, and threw the rest at Gavrilla

"Take it and go away "

"I won't, brother I can't Forgive me what I've done "

"Take it, I say," roared Chelkash, rolling his eyes fearfully

"Forgive me. I can't take it if you don't," said Gavrilla humbly, falling at Chelkash's feet in the rain-drenched sand

"That's a lie You will take it, you scum," said Chelkash with conviction Pulling up his companion's head by the hair, he thrust the money under his nose

"Take it Take it. You earned it Don't be afraid, take it And don't be ashamed that you almost killed a man Nobody would hunt you down for killing a man like me They'd even say thank you if they found out Here, take it "

Seeing that Chelkash was joking Gavrilla's heart grew lighter. He clutched the money

"And do you forgive me, brother? Please, do?" he begged tearfully

"My dear friend," replied Chelkash in a mocking tone, as he got up and stood swaying on his feet "What's there to forgive? Nothing to forgive Today you get me, tomorrow I get you "

"Ah brother, brother," sighed Gavrilla disconsolately, shaking his head

Chelkash stood in front of him with an odd smile on his face The rag on his head, which had gradually been getting redder, resembled a Turkish fez

The rain had become a downpour The sea gave a low roar, the waves hurled themselves savagely at the shore.

The two men were silent.

"Well, good-bye," said Chelkash mockingly as he turned to go

He staggered, his legs were shaking, and he held his head as if afraid of losing it

"Forgive me, brother," pleaded Gavrilla once more.

"That's all right," said Chelkash coldly, setting off

He stumbled away, holding his head with his left hand, pulling gently at his dark moustache with his right.

Gavrilla stood watching him until he disappeared in the rain which kept coming down in fine endless streams, enveloping the steppe in impenetrable steel-grey gloom

Then he took off his wet cap, crossed himself, looked at the money in his hand, heaved a deep sigh of relief, hid the money in his shirt, and strode off firmly down the shore in the opposite direction to that taken by Chelkash

The sea growled as it hurled its huge waves on the sand, smashing them to foam and spray The rain lashed at the water and the land The wind howled The air was filled with a roar, a wail, a murmur The rain cut off sight of sea and sky

Soon the rain and the spray washed away the red spot on the sand where Chelkash had lain, washed away the footsteps of Chelkash, washed away the footsteps of the youth who had walked so bravely down the beach And not a sign was left on this deserted shore to testify to the little drama enacted here by these two men

1894

One Autumn

One autumn I got myself into a very awkward and uncomfortable situation in the town where I had just arrived and where I did not know a living soul I found myself without a kopeck in my pocket and without a roof over my head

Having, in the first few days, sold all those parts of my clothing which I could possibly do without, I left the town for a place called Ustye where there were wharves and, in the season when the waters were navigable, a seethingly busy workaday life, but which now lay silent and deserted—it was going on for the end of October.

Splashing over the damp sand and raking it with a persistent eye in the hopes of finding some deposits of edible matter, I wandered lonely amongst the desolate buildings and trading booths and thought about what an excellent thing it is to have a full stomach

At this stage of cultural development it is easier to satisfy spiritual than bodily hunger You wander along streets surrounded by houses, tolerably handsome from without and—it is more than a fair guess—tolerably comfortable within, this may induce pleasant thoughts on the subject of architecture, hygiene and many other wise and lofty matters, you meet people dressed in warm, comfortable clothes—they are polite, always stepping aside to let you pass, tactfully refusing to notice the regrettable fact of your existence Indeed, the soul of a hungry man is always better and more healthfully nourished than the soul of a full man—a paradox from which it is no doubt possible to draw some extremely astute conclusion in favour of the well-fed! .

Evening was coming on, it was raining and the wind blew fitfully from the north It whistled through the empty

booths and stalls, beat against the boarded windows of the hotels and whipped the waves of the river into high, white crests of foam which hurried rank upon rank in the murky distance, leaping over one another in their haste It was as though the river felt the approach of winter and was running in terror from the fetters of ice which might be laid on it that very night by the north wind The sky was heavy and dark, and from it fell a constant spatter of fine rain, scarcely visible to the eye, the sad, elegiac nature of my surroundings was set off by two broken and hideous willows and an upside-down boat at their roots

The upside-down vessel with its broken keel and the trees stripped by the cold wind, old and pathetic Everything about me was broken down, barren and dead, and the sky wept ceaseless tears. Desolate and dark it was around me—it seemed as though everything were dying, as though soon I alone would be left alive and that cold death was waiting for me, too

And at that time I was seventeen—a splendid age!

I walked and walked over the cold, damp sand, my teeth chattering out trills in honour of hunger and cold and, suddenly, walking round the back of one of the booths in my vain search for something to eat—I saw, doubled up on the ground, a figure in a woman's dress, all soaked with rain and clinging to the bent shoulders Stopping beside her, I looked down to see what she was doing It appeared that she was digging a hole in the sand with her hands, tunnelling underneath the booth

"What are you doing that for?" I asked, squatting down on my heels beside her

She gave a stifled cry and leapt swiftly to her feet Now, when she stood and stared at me with wide-open fearful eyes, I saw that it was a young girl of my own age with a very sweet-looking little face, marked, unfortunately, by three large bruises. This spoilt the impression, although the bruises were distributed with an exquisite sense of symmetry—one beneath each eye, both of the same size, and another, somewhat larger, on the forehead, just above the

bridge of the nose In this symmetry could be seen the work of an artist of real refinement in the business of spoiling other people's beauty

The girl looked at me and the fear in her eyes slowly died away ... In a moment she had shaken her hands free from sand and adjusted her cotton headscarf, huddled herself against the wind and said

"You're hungry too, aren't you? You dig for a bit then, my hands are tired There's bread in there," she nodded towards the booth "That stall's still open "

I began to dig She, on her part, waited for a little and then, having watched me for a while, squatted down beside me and began to help

We worked in silence I could not say now whether at that moment I remembered about the criminal code, morality, property and such-like things which, according to those who know, we ought to bear in mind at every moment of our lives Wishing to stick to the truth as closely as possible, I must admit that, as far as I can remember, I was so absorbed in the business of tunnelling under the wall of the booth that I completely forgot about everything except what might be found in that booth

Evening was coming on Darkness—damp, raw, cold—was thickening all about us. The sound of the waves' seemed less boisterous than before, but the rain drummed on the boards of the booth ever louder and harder. Somewhere, we could already hear the sound of the night-watchman's rattle

"Is there a floor or not?" my assistant asked me quietly I did not understand what she was talking about and said nothing

"I mean, is there a floor to the booth? If there is, we may be breaking in all for nothing We'll dig the tunnel and then, maybe, there'll be thick planks to get through as well .. How'll you prize them open? Better break the padlock the padlock's not strong .. "

Bright ideas seldom visit the heads of women, however, as you see, it does happen I always was one to appreciate

good ideas and always did my best to put them into practice in so far as I was able

Having found the padlock, I gave it a sharp tug and pulled it out together with the rings My confederate bent down and darted snakelike into the booth through the oblong opening thus revealed

"Well done!" she called out approvingly

One word of praise from a woman is dearer to me than a whole ode from a man, though the man in question be as eloquent as all the ancient orators rolled into one At that moment, however, my mind was given to less galant considerations than at this present and, taking no notice of the girl's compliment, I asked her briefly and fearfully·

"Anything there?"

In a monotonous voice she began to enumerate her discoveries.

"A basket of old bottles .. sacks, empty .. an umbrella .. an iron bucket "

All quite inedible I felt my hopes sinking .. But suddenly she cried out in an animated voice

"Aha! Got it ..."

"What?"

"Bread ... a round loaf, white ... wet, though . catch!"

The round loaf rolled out to my feet and close behind it came my valiant partner in crime I had already broken off a small piece, stuffed it into my mouth and begun chewing .

"Here, give me some ... we must get away from here, though Where could we go?" She peered all around her, her eyes straining to pierce the murk . It was dark, wet, full of sounds .. "Over there there's an upturned boat .. What about it?"

"Let's go!" And we went, breaking off bits of our loot as we walked and stuffing them into our mouths. .. The rain was falling harder, the river roared, from somewhere or other there sounded a long, derisive whistle, as though some enormous being who did not know the meaning of fear were mocking everybody and everything, including the foul autumn evening and us, its two heroes. .. At the sound of

that whistle something seemed to clutch at my heart, nevertheless, I ate avidly, as did the girl now keeping pace with me on my left

"What is your name?" something prompted me to ask

"Natasha!" she answered, champing vigorously

I looked at her and my heart contracted painfully I looked into the darkness ahead, and it seemed to me that the ugly, ironic usage of my destiny was smiling at me—a secretive, cold smile ..

. The rain drummed relentlessly on the wooden boat, the muffled noise suggesting sad thoughts, and the wind whistled, penetrating the broken bottom through a wide crack in which a loose piece of plank was flapping and creaking on a plaintive note of apprehension The waves of the river slapped against the bank, they sounded monotonous and hopeless, as though they were telling of something inexpressively boring and unpleasant, something of which they were weary to the point of repulsion, something from which they would have liked to run away but about which it was nevertheless imperative that they should speak The sound of the rain became one with their slapping and above the upturned boat swam the long-drawn-out, heaving sighing of the earth, weary and offended at these eternal changes from brilliant, warm summer to cold, damp and foggy autumn. The wind rushed blindly on over the desolate shore and the foaming river, on and on, singing cheerless songs

Our accommodation under the boat was devoid of comfort it was cramped, damp and, through the hole in the bottom, small, cold drops of rain came spraying and eddies of wind kept bursting their way in on us . We sat in silence and shivered with cold I wanted to sleep, I remember Natasha was leaning her back against the side of the boat, curled up into a little ball Cuddling her knees up to her chin, she was staring fixedly at the river, her eyes wide open—on the white blur of her face they seemed immense because of the bruises below them She did not move This

stillness and silence—I felt—were gradually imbuing me with a kind of dread of my companion I wanted to get her to talk but did not know how to begin

She was the first to speak

"What a bloody life!" she pronounced distinctly, precisely and in a tone of utmost conviction

Yet it was not a complaint The words held too much indifference for a complaint You felt that she had thought things out in her own way, had thought things out and come to a certain conclusion which she had expressed aloud and which I could not contradict without lying to myself So I said nothing And she, as though unaware of my presence, continued to sit motionless

"To lie down and die, that'ld be one way out I suppose ." Natasha spoke again, softly this time, and thoughtfully And once again her words held no suggestion of complaint . It was clear that, having given due thought to life in general, she had surveyed her own case and calmly come to the conclusion that she was not in a position to undertake any other measure to protect herself against the outrages of life than, as she had said, "to lie down and die"

I felt an unbearable wave of nausea at such clarity of thought and knew that, unless I said something quick, I would most certainly burst into tears And that I was ashamed to do in front of a woman, more especially as she was not crying I decided to try talking to her

"Who beat you up?" I asked unable to think of anything more intelligent

"Pashka, of course, as usual " she answered, calmly and loudly

"And who is he?"

"My boy-friend .. A baker "

"Does he beat you often? "

"Whenever he gets drunk . "

Then, suddenly, moving over to sit beside me, she began to tell me about herself, Pashka and the relationship between them She was "one of these girls, you know, who. " and he was a baker with a ginger moustache and

played the accordion very well He used to visit her "at Madam's" and she liked him very much because he was good company and his clothes were clean His coat was worth 15 rubles and he wore soft wrinkled leather boots On these heads she had fallen in love with him and he had become her "special friend" No sooner had he become her "special friend", however, than he began taking the money which other clients gave her for sweets and, getting drunk on it, took to beating her—and that wouldn't have been so bad, only he began to go with other girls before her very eyes .

"And how can I help taking it to heart? It's not as if I was any worse than all others So he just does it to spite me, the swine The day before yesterday I got leave from Madam to go for a walk, went to his place and found Doonka sitting there, drunk And he was pretty well blotto too I says to him 'A swine, you are, a real swine! You're a double crosser!' And he beat me black and blue Used his feet, he did, and pulled my hair—the lot But that wouldn't be so bad! Only he tore everything And what am I to do now? How can I face Madam? Tore everything my dress and the jacket—brand new, it was And pulled the scarf off my head Oh God, what am I to do now?" Her voice broke suddenly into a dismal wail

And the wind wailed too, growing ever stronger and colder My teeth had begun to dance again She, too, was all huddled up against the cold and had moved so near me that I could see her eyes shining in the dark

"You're a bad lot, you men, I'ld trample you all underfoot, I would, I'ld tear you limb from limb If one of you lay there dying I'd spit in his ugly mug, I would, and not even feel sorry for him! Worthless brutes! You whine and whine and wag your tails like a lot of filthy dogs, but if you find a fool of a woman ready to take pity on you, then that's the end! You're trampling her underfoot before she knows what's struck her . lousy gigolos!"

Her swearing was extremely varied, but the words lacked power, neither anger nor real hatred of the "lousy gigolos"

could I distinguish in them In general, the tone of her speech was calm out of all proportion to what she was actually saying and her voice sadly monotonous

Nevertheless, all this affected me more strongly than the most eloquent and convincing pessimistic books and speeches of which I had read and heard quite a few, both before and afterwards, and which I read and listen to up to this very day And that, you see, is because the agony of the dying is always far more natural and impressive than the most exact and artistic descriptions of death

I was feeling rotten, probably more because of the cold than because of my fellow-lodger's conversation I groaned softly and my teeth chattered

Then, almost in the same instant, I felt two cold little hands—one touching my neck, the other coming to rest on my face and, at the same time, came the concerned, quiet, gentle question

"What's the matter with you?"

I was ready to think that it was someone else addressing me and not the Natasha who had only just declared that all men were swine and wished them all to perdition But already she was speaking quickly and hurriedly .

"What's the matter? Eh? Cold, are you? Getting a chill? You are a one, aren't you? Sitting there not saying nothing .. Like an owl! You should have told me you were cold long ago There lie down on the ground, stretch yourself out . And I'll lie down . That's it! Now hug me tighter.... There now, you ought to feel warm now And afterwards—we'll lie back to back ... We'll last the night somehow ... What's gone wrong, not taken to drink, have you? Lost your job? ... Never mind!"

She was trying to comfort me.... To put new heart into me..

May I be thrice accursed! How ironical all this was! Just think, there was I seriously concerned with the fate of humanity, dreaming of reorganising the whole social order, of politics and revolution, having read a variety of devilishly wise books whose profundity was most probably beyond

even their authors' comprehension, and, at that time, preparing to devote myself to becoming a "heavy-weight active force" Yet here I was being warmed by the body of a prostitute, a miserable, beaten, desperate being who had no place in life and was considered worthless and whom I had not had the wit to help before as she helped me and, even had I thought to do so, would scarcely have known how to go about it

Oh, I was ready to think that all this was happening to me in a dream, an absurd, unhappy dream .

But alas! I had no right to think that, because cold drops of rain were splattering down upon me, the woman's breast was pressed hard against my chest, I could feel her warm breath on my face, even if it did carry a suggestion of vodka .. nevertheless—so resuscitating .. The wind howled and moaned, the rain beat upon the boat, the waves slapped and even we in our close embrace were still trembling with cold All this was absolutely real, and I am convinced that no one has ever had such a bad and miserable dream as that reality.

And there was Natasha talking, talking on about something or other, tenderly and sympathetically as only women can talk Under the influence of the naive and tender things she was saying a kind of small flame burned up feebly inside me, and the warmth from it thawed my heart

Then a hail of tears began rolling from my eyes, washing from my heart much of the bitterness, longing, stupidity and dirt which had settled over it like scum before that night ... Natasha kept trying to cheer me

"That'll do, dearie, don't cry! That'll do! With God's help you'll get over it, you'll get your job back " and much of the same sort

And she kept kissing me, showering me with warm, generous kisses

These were the first woman's kisses which life had granted me and they were the best, for all the rest cost me terribly dear and gave me practically nothing

"There, there, don't cry, silly! I'll fix you up tomorrow if you've nowhere to go " I heard her quiet, reassuring whisper as though through sleep

We lav in each other's arms until dawn

When it was light, we crawled out from under the boat and went into the town . Then we took a friendly farewell of one another and parted never to meet again, although for six months I searched through all the slums for that sweet Natasha, with whom, one autumn, I spent the night which I have just described

If she is already dead—what a splendid thing that would be for her—may she rest in peace! And if she is alive—peace be unto her! And may her soul never waken to a sense of sin for that would be a superfluous grief to her and could make no difference to her way of life

1894

Song of the Falcon

The boundless sea, lapping lazily where the shore-line ran, slumbering motionless in the distance, was steeped in blue moonlight Soft and silvery, it merged at the horizon with the blue of the southern sky and slept soundly, mirroring the transparent fabric of fleecy clouds that also hung motionless, veiling, but not concealing, the golden tracery of the stars The sky seemed to be bending down to the sea, trying to catch what the restless waves were whispering as they washed languidly over the shore

The mountains, covered with wind-twisted trees, hurled their jagged peaks into the blue waste above, where their harsh contours were softened by the warm and caressing darkness of the southern night

The mountains were gravely contemplative Their dark shadows lay like confining garments upon the surging green waves, as if they wished to stay the tide, to silence the ceaseless plashing of the water, the sighing of the foam—all sounds violating the mysterious silence which flooded the scene, as did the silvery blue radiance of a moon not yet emerged from behind mountain peaks

"Al-lah ak-bar!" came softly from the lips of Nadir Ragim Ogly, an aged Crimean herdsman—tall, white-haired, tanned by the southern sun—a lean and wise old man

He and I were lying in the sand beside a huge rock draped in shadow and overgrown by moss—a sad and sombre rock that had broken away from its native mountain One side of it was festooned with seaweed and water plants which seemed to bind it to the narrow strip of sand between sea and mountains The flames of our camp-fire lighted the shore-side, and their flicker sent shadows dancing upon

its ancient surface, scarred by a network of deep crevices

Ragim and I were boiling some fish we had just caught, and we were both in a mood that made everything seem lucid, inspired, accessible to the understanding, our hearts were light and innocent and the only thing we wanted to do was lie here and dream

The sea lapped at the shore, the sound of the waves so gentle that they seemed begging to warm themselves at our fire Now and then the even hum of the surf was interrupted by a higher and more playful note that would be one of the bolder waves creeping to our very feet.

Ragim lay facing the sea, his elbows dug into the sand, his head in his hands, gazing thoughtfully into the shadowy distance His sheepskin hat had slipped to the back of his head and a fresh sea breeze fanned his high forehead covered with fine lines. He made philosophical observations, without caring whether I listened or not, as if he were talking to the sea.

"A man who serves God faithfully goes to heaven And one who does not serve God or the Prophet? Maybe he's out there—in that foam Maybe those silver spots on the water are him Who knows?"

The dark and heaving sea grew brighter, and patches of moonlight were scattered haphazardly over its surface The moon had slipped out from behind the shaggy mountaintops and was now dreamily pouring its radiance on the shore, on the rock beside which we were lying, and on the sea, which rose to meet it with a little sigh

"Ragim, tell me a story," I said to the old man

"What for?" he asked, without turning his head

"Oh, just because I like your stories "

"I've told you all of them I don't know any more "

He wanted to be coaxed, and I coaxed him

"If you want me to, I'll sing you a song," he consented

I was only too glad to listen to one of his old songs, and so he began reciting in a sing-song voice, trying to preserve the cadence of the ancient melody

High in the mountains crawled a Snake and it came to rest in a misty gorge looking down on the sea

High in the sky shone the sun, and the breath of the mountains rose hot in the sky, and the waves down below broke loud on the rocks

And swift through the gorge, through the darkness and mist, flowed a river, upturning the stones in its rush to the sea

Crested with foam, vigorous, hoary, it cut through the rock and plunged to the sea with an angry roar

Suddenly a Falcon with blood on its wings and a wound in its breast fell out of the sky into the gorge where the Snake lay coiled

It uttered a cry as it struck the earth and lay beating its wings on the rock in despair

The Snake was frightened and darted away, but soon it saw that the bird was doomed, that the bird would die in a minute or two

So back it crawled to the wounded bird and tauntingly hissed in its ear

"So soon thou must die?"

"So soon must I die," said the Falcon, sighing "But oh, I have lived! I have tasted of happiness, fought a good fight! I have soared in the sky! Never shalt thou, poor thing, see the sky as have I!"

"The sky? What is that? Why, nothing at all Could I crawl in the sky? Far better this gorge—so warm and so damp

Thus said the Snake to the Falcon, the lover of freedom And it laughed in its heart at the Falcon's brave words

And it thought to itself what matters it whether one flies or one crawls? The end is the same all will lie in the earth, all to dust will return

Of a sudden the Falcon uplifted its head and swept the dark gorge with a tortured glance

Water came oozing from cracks in the rock, and the air of the gorge smelt of death and decay

With a mighty effort the Falcon cried out in sorrow and longing

"Ah, to soar in the sky, to soar once again! I would capture the foe .. crush his head to my breast make him choke on my blood . Oh, the joy of the struggle!"

Thought the Snake it must really be fine to live in the sky if it wrings such a cry from the Falcon!

And it said to the Falcon, the lover of freedom "Crawl out to the cliff's edge and throw thyself over Perhaps thy wings will carry thee still, and again thou shalt soar in the sky "

A tremor passed over the Falcon It gave a proud cry and crawled out on the cliff, seeking a hold in the slime

And on reaching the edge it spread wide its wings, drew a deep breath, and, with a flash of its eyes, plunged into space

Swift as a stone fell the Falcon, scattering feathers, tearing its wings as it fell

A wave caught it up, washed it of blood, wrapped it in foam, and carried it down to the sea

Mournful the cry of the waves as they broke on the face of the cliff And gone was the bird—lost to sight in the vast expanse of the sea

2 For long the Snake lay coiled in the gorge, pondering the death of the bird, pondering its love of the sky

And it glanced up into the sky, where the restless heart sees a promise of happiness

"What did it see, that hapless Falcon, in emptiness—space without end? Why should such birds rob others of peace with their passion for soaring? What is revealed in the sky? All this can I learn in a single flight, be it ever so brief "

Thus having spoken, it coiled itself tighter, leaped into space, and flashed, a dark streak, in the sun

But never shall those born to crawl, learn to fly Down on the rocks fell the Snake, but not to its death did it fall It laughed, and it said

"So this is the joy of the flight the joy of the fall! Oh, foolish birds! Unhappy on earth, which they know not, they would climb to the sky and live in its throbbing expanses But what is the sky but an emptiness? Light in abundance, but nothing to sustain the body Why, then, such pride? And why such contempt? To hide from the world their mad aspirations, their failure to cope with the business of life? Ridiculous birds! Never again will your words deceive me For now I know all, I have seen the sky I have been there and explored it, and out of the sky have I fallen, though not to my death All the stronger has grown my faith in myself Let them live with illusions who love not the earth I have found out the truth Never again shall I heed the birds' challenge Born of the earth, I am earthly "

So saying, it coiled on a stone, full of pride in itself

The sea was shining, a dazzle of light, and fiercely the waves beat the shore

In their leonine roar rang the song of the Falcon Trembled the rocks from the blows of the sea, thembled the sky from the notes of the song

"We sing a song to the madness of daring!

"The madness of daring is the wisdom of life Oh, Falcon undaunted! Thou hast shed precious blood in the fight with the foe, but the time will yet come when the drops of thy blood will glow like sparks in the gloom of life and fire brave hearts with love of freedom and light

"Thou hast paid with thy life But thou shalt live on in the songs of the brave, a proud challenge to struggle for freedom and light!

"We sing a song to the madness of daring!"

Silent are the opalescent reaches of the sea Softly sing the waves lapping the shore, and I, too, am silent as I gaze into the distance Now there are more silvery patches of moonlight on the water . Our kettle is humming quietly

One of the waves outdistances its brothers and gives a mocking little cry as it reaches for Ragim's head

"Get back! Where do you think you're going?" cries Ragim, waving his hand, and the wave rolls back obediently

I find nothing funny or startling in Ragim's personification of the wave Everything about us is exceptionally alive, gentle and soothing The sea is calm, and one feels power in the cool breath it wafts towards mountain peaks still charged with the heat of the day In golden letters upon the dark blue background of the sky the stars have traced a solemn message, something enchanting the soul and disturbing the mind with the sweet expectation of a revelation

Everything is drowsing, but with tense awareness, as if in another instant all objects would shake off their slumber and lift their voices in a choir of unutterably sweet harmony This harmony would speak of the mysteries of life, would explain them to the mind and then extinguish the mind like a phantom flame and whisk the soul up into the blue spaces of the night where the delicate tracery of the stars sings the same divine music of revelation

1895

For Want of Something Better to Do

The passenger train, like an enormous serpent belching forth clouds of dense grey smoke, was swallowed up in the boundless steppe, in a yellow sea of wheat As the smoke dissolved in the torrid air, so did the irate burst of noise that for a few moments violated the impassive silence of that vast and empty plain, in the middle of which stood a tiny railway station whose loneliness evoked the most mournful sentiments

And when the noise of the train which, if raucous, was at least alive, had died away, the same oppressive silence enveloped the station

The steppe was golden yellow, the sky sapphire blue And both of them were illimitable Amid such vastness the little brown station buildings gave the impression of being chance brush-strokes spoiling the melancholy picture executed painstakingly by an artist with no imagination

Every day at twelve o'clock at noon and at four o'clock in the afternoon trains came out of the steppe and stood at the station for exactly two minutes These four minutes represented the main, and indeed the only diversion at the station, for they alone brought new impressions to the people employed there

In every train were all kinds of people in all kinds of clothes They were to be seen but for an instant a fleeting picture of tired, impatient, indifferent faces at carriage windows—and then a bell, a whistle, and they were noisily whisked away into the steppe, into the distance, into cities where life seethed and bustled

The station employees gazed at these faces with curiosity, and when the train was gone they told each other their impressions All around them stretched the silent steppe, above them arched the impassive sky, and in their hearts

brooded envy of these people who sped to unknown destinations day after day, leaving them imprisoned in the wilderness, beyond the pale of life, so to speak

Here they are standing on the platform, watching the black ribbon of a departing train disappear in the golden sea of wheat And so absorbed are they in their impressions of this momentary glimpse of life, that they are silent

Nearly everyone is here the stationmaster, a stout, genial, fair-haired man with the untrimmed whiskers of a Cossack, his assistant, a red-headed young fellow with a goatee, Luka, the station guard, small and quick and cunning, and one of the switchmen named Gomozov, a quiet, stocky fellow with a thick beard

The wife of the stationmaster is sitting on a bench beside the station door She is small and fat and suffers greatly from the heat A baby is sleeping in her lap, and the baby's face is as round and red as its mother's

The train goes down an incline and disappears as if swallowed up by the earth

The stationmaster turns to his wife

"Is the samovar ready, Sonya?"

"Of course," she replies in a soft and languid voice

"Luka! Put things in shape here—sweep the platform and the rails Look at all the rubbish they've left behind "

"I know, Matvei Yegorovich "

"Well, shall we have tea, Nikolai Petrovich?"

"As usual," replies his assistant

If it happens to have been the noon train that has passed, Matvei Yegorovich says to his wife

"Is dinner ready, Sonya?"

Then he gives Luka instructions which are always the same, and says to his assistant, who boards with them

"Well, shall we have dinner?"

"We shall," his assistant replies, reasonably enough

And they leave the platform and go into a room that has a great many plants and very little furniture in it, a room that smells of cooking and diapers and where the table talk is always about what has passed them by

"Did you notice that brunette in the yellow dress in the second-class carriage, Nikolai Petrovich? A tempting morsel, if you ask me!"

"Not bad, but no taste in clothes," says his assistant

His remarks are always brief and spoken with assurance, for he prides himself on being a man of education and experience He finished the gymnasium He has a note-book with a black binding in which he writes down sayings by eminent men which he finds in the books and newspapers that happen to fall into his hands The stationmaster accepts his authority in all matters outside their work, and listens attentively to whatever he has to say He is especially impressed by the gems of wisdom to be found in Nikolai Petrovich's note-book and goes into ecstasies over them in a simple-hearted way His assistant's observation on the brunette's taste in clothes raises doubts in his own mind

"Why?" he asks "Shouldn't brunettes wear yellow?"

"I wasn't thinking of the colour, but of the cut," explains Nikolai Petrovich as he neatly transfers some jam from the glass dish to his own plate

"Cut? That's another thing," agrees the stationmaster

His wife joins in the conversation, for this is a subject close to her heart and accessible to her mind But since the intellects of these people have been subjected to little refinement, their talk drags on feebly and rarely touches their emotions

Through the windows can be seen the steppe, which is under a spell of silence, and the sky, magnificent in its detached serenity

Scarcely an hour passes but a goods train goes by The crews of all these trains are old acquaintances The guards are somnolent creatures who have had the spirit taken out of them by endless trips through the steppe To be sure, they sometimes recount stories of accidents on the way at a certain place a man was killed Or they gossip about their work so-and-so was fined, somebody else was transferred These titbits are not discussed, they are gobbled up as a glutton gobbles up a rare and tasty dish

Slowly the sun sinks to the rim of the steppe, turning crimson as it draws near the earth A reddish glow is cast over everything, and this gives rise to a vague longing—the lure of the spaces beyond the wilderness At last the sun touches the horizon and drops listlessly into or behind it For a long time after that the bright tones of the sunset play soft music in the sky, but it grows fainter and fainter as a warm and soundless dusk sets in Stars come out, all a-tremble, as if frightened by the dreariness of the scene

The steppe seems to shrink in the dusk, silently the shadows of night close in on the station from all sides And then comes night itself, dark and gloomy

Lights are lit at the station Higher and brighter than all others is the green signal light, encompassed by darkness and silence

From time to time a bell clangs, giving notice of an approaching train, the urgent sound is borne out into the steppe, where it is swallowed up

Shortly after the clanging of the bell a red light comes flashing out of the dark waste, and the silence of the steppe is shattered by the roar of a train making its way towards the lonely station wrapped in darkness

The lives of the "lower classes" at this little station were different from those of the aristocracy Luka, the station guard, waged a constant struggle with his desire to run off to his wife and brother who lived in a village seven versts from the station He had a "farm" there, as he usually put it to Gomozov when asking this staid and taciturn switchman to "do duty" for him

The word "farm" invariably drew a sigh from Gomozov

"Very well, go ahead," he would say "A farm has got to be looked after, no doubt about that "

But the other switchman—Afanasy Yagodka, an old soldier with a round red face covered with grey stubble—was of a mocking disposition, and he did not believe Luka

"A farm!" he would scoff derisively "A wife, that makes more sense And that wife of yours—is she a widow? Or is her husband a soldier?"

"You Birdie-Brigadier!" Luka would snort contemptuously

He called Yagodka the Birdie-Brigadier because the old soldier had a passion for birds His little house was hung inside and out with cages and perches, and all day long, inside the house and all around it, could be heard the clamour of birds The quails which the soldier had taken captive kept up a monotonous and uninterrupted "cheep-chirreep!", the starlings muttered long speeches, little birds of all colours peeped, chirped and sang tirelessly, filling the soldier's lonely life with delight He devoted all his leisure to them, and while being solicitous of and devoted to the birds, took not the slightest interest in his fellows at the station He called Luka a snake and Gomozov a *katsap*, and accused them to their faces of trailing the women, for which, in his opinion, they deserved a good thrashing

As a rule, Luka paid little attention to his taunts, but if the soldier went too far, Luka would tear into him at length and with vengeance

"You garrison rat, you half-chewed turnip! What're you good for, you drummer-boy to the colonel's goat? All you've ever done is chase frogs under the guns and stand guard over the company's cabbages Who are you to be calling other people names? Go back to your quails, you Birdie-Brigadier!"

After calmly listening to such a tirade, Yagodka would go and complain to the stationmaster, who would shout that he had more important matters to attend to and turn him out After which Yagodka would find Luka and undertake to give Luka a tongue-lashing himself—calmly, without losing his temper, employing a vocabulary so weightily obscene that Luka would run away spitting in disgust

If the soldier jeered Gomozov because of his frivolity, the latter would sigh and make uneasy efforts to defend himself

"What's to be done? Looks as if it just can't be helped It's the mischief, all right, but, as they say, judge not lest ye be judged yourselves "

One day the soldier replied to this by saying with a little laugh

"The same old recipe for all ills! 'Judge not, judge not Why, if people didn't judge their fellows they wouldn't have anything to talk about!"

There was one other woman at the station besides the stationmaster's wife This was Arina, the cook She was almost forty years old and exceedingly ugly—dumpy in figure, with long pendulous breasts, and always dirty and unkempt She waddled when she walked and there was an intimidated look in the slits of eyes that glinted in her pock-marked face There was something cowed and slave-like in her ungainly form Her thick lips were permanently pursed, as if she wanted to ask forgiveness of everyone—as if she wanted to fall on her knees before people, and was afraid of crying For eight months Gomozov lived at the station without paying any particular attention to her He would say "Hullo" in passing, she would return the salutation, they might exchange a few perfunctory words, then each would continue on his way But one day Gomozov came into the stationmaster's kitchen and asked Arina to make him some shirts She agreed to, and when they were ready, she took them to him herself

"Thanks," said Gomozov "Three shirts at ten kopecks a piece—that'll be thirty kopecks I owe you, won't it?"

"I guess so," said Arina

Gomozov fell to thinking

"What *gubernia* are you from?" he said at last to the woman, whose eyes had been fixed on his beard all this time

"Ryazan," she said

"Pretty far away How did you ever come here?"

"I don't know I'm all alone Haven't got nobody "

"That's enough to make a person go even farther," sighed Gomozov

And both of them were silent again

"Take me I'm from Nizhny Novgorod Sergachev Uyezd," said Gomozov after a while "I'm alone, too Nobody at all But once upon a time I had a house and a wife and children Two of them My wife died of the cholera, the kids of one thing or another And me—I wore myself out with grieving Later on I tried to start all over again but it was no good The works had run down and there was no winding them up again So off I went—as far away as I could I've been living like this for more than two years "

"It's bad when you've not got a place to call your own," said Arina softly

"Very bad Are you a widow?"

"No, I'm a maid "

"Go along with you!" said Gomozov, taking no pains to disguise his incredulity

"Honest to goodness," insisted Arina

"Why didn't you ever get married?"

"Who'd have me? I haven't got nothing A man'd want something And then my face is so ugly "

"True," drawled Gomozov, scrutinising her curiously as he stroked his beard He asked her what her pay was

"Two and a half "

"I see So I owe you thirty kopeks, eh? Look, come and get it tonight About ten o'clock, will you? I'll pay you and we'll have a glass of tea together for want of something better to do We're lonely souls, both of us Do come "

"I will," she said simply, and went out

She came back at exactly ten o'clock and went away at dawn

Gomozov did not invite her to come again and did not give her her thirty kopecks. She came back of her own accord She came back, bovine and submissive, and stood silently in front of him And he stared up at her from where he was lying on the couch

"Sit down," he said after a while, moving over

When she was seated, he said, "Listen, keep this dark Don't let a soul get wind of it, hear? I'll get into trouble if you

do I'm not young any more, and neither are you, understand?"

She nodded

As he was seeing her out he handed her some clothes to mend for him

"Don't let a soul get wind of it," he admonished her again

And so, carefully hiding their relationship from others, they went on living together

At night Anna would steal to his room almost on all fours He received her indulgently, with the air of a lord and master

"What a mug you've got!" he would say at times

She would only smile back feebly and apologetically, and on leaving would take some bundle of work to do for him

They did not see each other often But sometimes when they met on the station grounds, he would whisper

"Drop in tonight "

And she would come obediently and with a look of such gravity on her pock-marked face that one would have thought she was fulfilling a duty whose solemn importance she fully appreciated

But on going home the old look of guilt and apprehension would come back

Occasionally she would linger in some secluded corner or behind a tree to gaze out into the steppe Night reigned out there, and its grim silence filled her heart with terror

One day, after seeing off the afternoon train, the station officials sat down to tea in the shade of some poplars growing outside the windows of the stationmaster's rooms

They often had tea there on hot days—it introduced a certain variety into the monotony of their lives

On this particular day they were drinking in silence, having said all there was to say about the last train

"Today's hotter then yesterday," said the stationmaster, holding out his empty glass to his wife with one hand and wiping the sweat off his forehead with the other

"It just seems hotter because you're bored to death," said his wife as she took the glass

"H'm, maybe you're right. Cards would help But there's only three of us "

His assistant shrugged his shoulders and screwed up his eyes

"Card games, according to Schopenhauer, show the bankruptcy of the mind," he pronounced impressively

"Very clever," gurgled the stationmaster "What was that? The bankruptcy of the mind—h'm Who was it said it?"

"Schopenhauer. A German philosopher "

"A philosopher? H'm "

"Those philosophers—what do they do? Work at universities?" inquired Sonya

"How shall I explain it? Being a philosopher is not an occupation but a natural endowment, so to speak Anyone can be a philosopher—anyone who is born with a tendency to think and to seek cause and effect in all things To be sure, philosophers are sometimes to be found in universities, but they may be anywhere—even in the employment of the railway "

"And do they make a lot of money—those who are at the universities?"

"It all depends on their capabilities."

"If only we had a fourth partner, we'd put in a nice couple of hours," sighed the stationmaster

And the talk broke off again

High in the blue sky sang the larks, from branch to branch of the poplars hopped the robins, whistling softly. From inside the house came the crying of the baby

"Is Anna in there?" asked the stationmaster

"Of course," replied his wife

"There's something highly original about that woman, have you noticed it, Nikolai Petrovich?"

"'Originality is the mother of banality,'" mused Nikolai Petrovich, looking very sage and ponderous.

"What's that?" perked up the stationmaster

When the saying had been repeated in edifying accents, the stationmaster half-closed his eyes deliciously, while his wife remarked in languorous tones

"It's simply wonderful the way you remember what you read! As for me, I read something one day and forget it the next. Why, just the other day I read something frightfully interesting and amusing in the *Niva* but for the life of me I can't remember what it was "

"All a matter of habit," explained Nikolai Petrovich tersely

"That's even better than that—what's his name? Schopenhauer," said the stationmaster with a smile "In other words, everything new grows old "

"Or just the reverse, for, as one of the poets has said 'Life in her wisdom is frugal, for she always makes the new out of the old '"

"Damn it all, where do you get them from? They come pouring out of you like out of a sieve!"

The stationmaster gave a delighted chuckle, his wife smiled sweetly, and Nikolai Petrovich made a vain effort to hide his satisfaction

"Who was it said that about banality?"

"Baratinsky, a poet "

"And that other?"

"Also a poet Fofanov "

"Smart fellows," said the stationmaster in approbation of the poets, and he repeated the quotation in a sing-song voice, a rapt smile on his face

The boredom of their lives played a sort of game with them, it would release them from its clutches for a moment, only to seize them the tighter Then they would grow silent again and sit there puffing with the heat, which their tea-drinking only intensified

There was nothing but sun in the steppe

"As I was saying about Anna," resumed the stationmaster "She's a queer creature I can't help wondering at her It's as if she'd been struck down by something—never

laughs, never sings, hardly ever speaks Like a stump in the ground But she's a first-class worker And the way she looks after Lolya—nothing's too much to do for the baby "

He spoke in lowered tones for fear Arina might overhear him. He was well aware that one must never pay servants compliments—it spoils them Sonya interrupted him and gave a frown full of hidden meaning

"Enough of such talk There's lots of things you don't know about her," she said

Nikolai Petrovich began to sing softly, beating time with his spoon on the table

A slave to love,
I lack the strength
To fight with thee,
My blessed demon.

"What? What's that?" put in the stationmaster "Her? You must be fooling, both of you!"

And he burst into loud laughter His jowls shook and drops of sweat dripped off his brow

"It's not funny in the least," said Sonya "For one thing, she's in charge of the baby, and for another—just look at this bread! Burnt and sour And why?"

"There's no doubt it, the bread's not what it should be You'll have to scold her for it. But good God, I never expected this. Why, damn it all, she's nothing but dough herself! And *he*! Who is *he*? Luka? Won't I tease him, the rascal! Or Yagodka—Old Shave-Lip?"

"Gomozov," said Nikolai Petrovich tersely

"*Him*? That quiet fellow? Come, you must be making it up!"

The stationmaster was highly amused by the discovery One minute he would laugh till he cried, the next he would observe seriously that the lovers would have to be given a severe reprimand, and then, as he imagined the tender words exchanged between them, he would go off into peals of laughter again.

In the end he began to probe for details At that Nikolai Petrovich pulled a stern face and Sonya cut him short

"The baboons! Just wait, I'll have some fun with them yet! Very amusing," said the irrepressible stationmaster

At that moment Luka put in an appearance

"Telegraph's clicking," he announced

"I'm coming Signal Number 42 "

Presently he and his assistant were making their way to the station where Luka was ringing the bell to signal the train Nikolai Petrovich telegraphed to the next station for permission to dispatch train No 42 while the stationmaster paced the floor of the office, smiling to himself and saying

"You and me'll play a trick on them, shall we? For want of something better to do At least we'll have a laugh "

"That's permissible," said Nikolai Petrovich as he operated the telegraph key

Philosophers, as he knew, should be laconic

Very soon after that an opportunity for them to have their laugh presented itself

One night Gomozov visited Arina in the shed where, at his demand and with the consent of her mistress, Arina had made a bed for herself among all kinds of lumber It was cold and damp there, and the broken chairs, discarded tubs, boards, and other rubbish took on fearsome forms in the dark When Arina was alone she was so terrified she could not sleep and would lie in the straw with wide-open eyes, mumbling prayers to herself

Gomozov came, mauled her for a long time without saying a word, grew tired and fell asleep But Arina Woke him up almost immediately

"Timofei Petrovich! Timofei Petrovich!" she whispered in alarm

"What?" replied Gomozov, only half-awake

"They've locked us in "

"What's that?" he asked as he jumped up

"They came to the door and padlocked it "

"You're crazy!" he whispered in fright and anger, thrusting her away.

"See for yourself," she said humbly.

He got up, went stumbling past the lumber to the door and gave it a push.

"It's all that soldier's doings," he said gloomily after a pause.

A burst of laughter came from the other side of the door.

"Let me out!" called Gomozov.

"What's that?" came the soldier's voice.

"Let me out, I say "

"In the morning," said the soldier, turning away.

"I've got to go on duty, damn it all!" pleaded Gomozov wrathfully.

"I'll do duty for you. Stay right where you are."

And the soldier went away.

"You dirty dog!" muttered the switchman miserably. "Here, he can't lock me in like this. There's the stationmaster. What'll he tell him? The stationmaster'll be sure to ask where Gomozov is, and then what'll he say?"

"I'm afraid it's the stationmaster told him to do it," murmured Anna dismally.

"The stationmaster?" repeated Gomozov in fright. "Why should he do such a thing?" He grew thoughtful a moment, then shouted at her, "You're lying!"

A profound sigh was her only answer.

"God, what'll happen now?" said the switchman, seating himself on a tub by the door. "I'm disgraced. And it's all your fault, you pig faced monster!"

And he shook his fist in the direction from which came the sound of her breathing. She said nothing.

They were enveloped in grey shadows—shadows impregnated by the smell of mould and sauerkraut and some other acrid smell that tickled the nostrils. Thin ribbons of moonlight slipped through cracks in the door. From outside came the rumble of a goods train withdrawing from the station.

"Why don't you say something, you scarecrow?" said Gomozov, angry and contemptuous. "What am I to do now? You got me into this fix, and now you have nothing to say? Think of a way out, damn you! How am I going to live down this disgrace? God! What ever made me take up with such a creature!"

"I'll ask them to forgive me," said Arina softly.

"Well?"

"Maybe they will."

"What's that to me? All right, they'll forgive you; what of it? Am I disgraced or not? They'll have the laugh on me just the same."

In a few minutes he began to curse and rail at her again. Time dragged on insufferably. At last the woman said to him in a trembling voice:

"Forgive me, Timofei Petrovich."

"Forgive you with an axe that's what I'd like to do," he snarled.

And again there was silence, heavy and oppressive, full of aching misery for the two people imprisoned in the darkness.

"Lordy, if only it would get light!" moaned Arina.

"Hold your tongue! I'll show you a light!" threatened Gomozov, and hurled another string of abuse at her. Then again the torture of silence. Time seemed to drag even more cruelly with the coming of dawn, as if each minute loitered on purpose, finding entertainment in the comic situation of these two people.

After a while Gomozov fell asleep and was wakened up by the crowing of a rooster outside the shed.

"Hey, pig-face, are you asleep?" he whispered.

"No," replied Arina with a sigh.

"Why not?" he asked ironically. "Ugh!"

"Timofei Petrovich!" wailed Arina. "Don't be angry with me. Take pity on me. In the name of Christ, take pity on me. I'm all alone, without a soul in the world. You—you're the only one I have. After all, we—"

"Stop howling! Don't make people laugh," interrupted

Gomozov harshly, suppressing the woman's hysterical whispers which nonetheless softened him somewhat. "Hold your tongue, you half-wit."

And so, without speaking, they went on waiting for the passage of each successive minute. But the passage of the minutes brought them nothing. At last rays of sunlight came through the cracks in the door, stitching through the darkness in shining threads. Steps were heard outside. Someone came up to the door, stood there a moment, and went away.

"Fiends!" roared Gomozov, spitting viciously. Once more they waited in strained silence.

"Dear Lord, have mercy..." murmured Arina.

Stealthy steps seemed to be heard. Suddenly the lock clicked and the stern voice of the stationmaster was heard.

"Gomozov!" he cried. "Take Arina's arm and lead her out! Lively, now!"

"Come here, you," muttered Gomozov. Arina went over and stood beside him with hanging head.

The door was opened, and there stood the stationmaster.

"Congratulations on your newly-wedded state," he said, bowing to Arina. "Come, strike up the band!"

Gomozov stepped outside and was stopped by a deafening burst of noise. Luka, Yagodka and Nikolai Petrovich were standing at the door. Luka was beating on the bottom of a pail with his fist and shouting at the top of his lungs in a strident tenor; the soldier was blowing a tin horn; Nikolai Petrovich, his cheeks distended, was waving one hand and blowing through his lips as if on a trumpet:

"Pom! Pom! Pom-pom-pom!"

The pail made a crashing sound; the horn shrieked and wailed. The stationmaster bent in two with laughter. His assistant, too, burst out laughing at the sight of the dumbfounded Gomozov whose face was ashen and whose trembling lips were twisted into an embarrassed smile. Behind him stood Arina, her head on her chest, as motionless as if turned to stone.

Luka made dreadful faces at Gomozov as he sang

Arina whispered in his ear
What any lover loves to hear

The soldier went over to Gomozov and tooted his horn in his very ear

"Come along Come on, take her arm!" cried the stationmaster, choking with laughter

"Oh, oh! Stop it! I'll die!" shrieked Sonya who was sitting on the porch rocking with laughter

"'For a moment's bliss I shall suffer all,'" sang Nikolai Petrovich

"Hurrah for the newly weds!" called out the stationmaster as Gomozov took a step forward And all four of them shouted "Hurrah!", the soldier in a roaring bass

Arina followed at the heels of Gomozov Now her head was raised, her mouth hung open and her arms dangled limply at her sides Her dull eyes stared in front of her, but it is doubtful that they saw anything

"Make them kiss each other, husband! Ha, ha, ha!"

"A kiss, newly weds!" shouted Nikolai Petrovich, at which the stationmaster's legs refused to support him and he sank weakly against the trunk of a tree The pail kept clanging, the horn tooted and hooted, and Luka did a little dance as he sang

The cabbage soup Arina made
Is much too thick, I am afraid!

Nikolai Petrovich blew out his cheeks again

"Pom pom pom! Toot toot toot! Pom pom! Toot toot!"

When Gomozov reached the door of the barracks he disappeared Arina was left standing in the courtyard surrounded by a group of wild people who shouted, laughed, whistled in her ear, and leaped about her in an orgy of merriment There she stood in their midst with immobile face dirty, unkempt, pitiable, absurd

"The bridegroom's gone off and left her behind," called the stationmaster to his wife, pointing his finger at Arina and doubling up with laughter.

Arina turned her head to him and then walked past the barracks, out into the steppe. Her departure was attended by shouts, laughter, hooting.

"Enough! Leave her alone!" called out Sonya. "Give her a chance to come to. The dinner's got to be cooked, don't forget."

Arina went out into the steppe; out beyond the demarcation line to a field of shaggy wheat. She walked slowly, like one lost in thought.

"How did you like it?" asked the stationmaster of the participants in this little joke, who were now reminding each other of choice details of the newly-weds' behaviour. They were all roaring with laughter. And even here Nikolai Petrovich found occasion to insert one of his gems of wisdom:

It is no crime to laugh
At what is laughable.

This he said to Sonya, adding as a caution, "But it is harmful to laugh too much."

There was a great deal of laughter at the station that day, but a very bad dinner, for Arina did not come back to cook it and this task devolved upon the stationmaster's wife. But even a bad dinner could not cast a damp over people's spirits. Gomozov did not come out of the barracks until it was time for him to go on duty. When he did come out he was summoned to the stationmaster's office where Nikolai Petrovich, to the vast amusement of Matvei Yegorovich and Luka, cross-examined him as to how he had "conquered" his beauty.

"The most extraordinary tale of man's temptation and fall I've ever heard," said Nikolai Petrovich to the stationmaster.

"And a very bad fall it was," said the staid Gomozov with a wry smile He realised that if he could give an account making Anna look ridiculous, he himself would be spared much of the laughter

"At first she just kept winking at me," he said

"Winking? Ho, ho, ho! Fancy that, Nikolai Petrovich *her* winking! Simply smashing!"

"Just kept winking, that is, and I says to myself, 'It's mischief you're up to, my girl!' After that she says to me, 'If you want me to, I'll make you some shirts'"

"'But the important thing was not the needle,'" observed Nikolai Petrovich, adding to the stationmaster by way of explanation, "That, you know, is from one of Nekrasov's poems Go on, Gomozov"

And Gomozov went on, at first with an effort, but little by little gaining inspiration from his lies, for he saw that they were serving him well

Meanwhile she of whom he spoke was lying in the steppe She had walked far out into the sea of wheat, where she had sunk heavily down on to the ground and lay without moving When she could no longer stand the heat of the sun on her back, she turned over and covered her face with her hands to cut off the sight of a sky that was too clear, a sun that was too bright

Soft was the rustle of the wheat about this woman, crushed by shame, ceaseless and solicitous the chirping of innumerable grasshoppers It was hot She tried to pray, but could not remember the words of a prayer Mocking faces danced before her eyes Her ears were full of the sounds of laughter, the tooting of the horn, Luka's shrill voice This, or the heat, constricted her chest, and she unfastened her blouse and exposed her body to the sun, hoping it would be easier to breathe The sun scorched her skin, something hot seemed to be boring inside her breast, her breath came in gasps

"Lord, have mercy" she murmured from time to time

But the only reply was the rustle of the wheat and the chirping of the grasshoppers Lifting her head above the

waves of wheat, she saw their golden shimmer, saw the black water tower thrusting into the air beyond the station, saw the roofs of the station buildings There was nothing else on the boundless yellow plain covered by the blue vault of the sky, and it seemed to Arina that she was alone in all the world, and that she was lying in the very centre of it, and that no one would ever come to relieve the burden of her loneliness no one ever

Towards evening she heard cries

"Arina! Arina, you cow!"

One of the voices belonged to Luka, the other to the soldier She had hoped to hear a third voice, but he did not call her, and because of this she shed copious tears that ran swiftly down her pock marked cheeks And as she cried she rubbed her bare breast against the dry warm earth to stop the burning sensation that had become more and more tormenting She cried, and then she stopped crying, suppressing her sobs as if afraid someone would hear her and forbid her to cry

When night came she got up and slowly made her way back to the station

When she reached the buildings she stood leaning against the wall of the shed for a long time gazing out over the steppe A goods train came and went, and she overheard the soldier telling the story of her shame to the conductors, who roared with laughter Their laughter was carried far out into the steppe, where the marmots were peeping softly

"Lord, have mercy," sighed the woman, pressing her body against the wall But her sighs did not lighten the burden on her heart

Towards morning she climbed up into the attic of the station and hanged herself with the clothes line

The smell of the corpse led them to find Arina two days later At first they were frightened, then they began to discuss who might be held guilty for what had happened Nikolai Petrovich proved irrefutably that Gomozov was the guilty one The stationmaster gave the switchman a blow on the jaw and warned him to keep his mouth shut.

Officials came and carried on an investigation It was discovered that Anna had suffered from melancholia Some railway workmen were ordered to take the body out into the steppe and bury it This done, peace and order once more reigned at the station

And once more its inhabitants lived four minutes a day, pining away with loneliness and boredom, with heat and idleness, gazing enviously after the trains that rushed past, leaving them behind

And in the winter, when blizzards came screaming and shrieking out of the steppe, pouring snow and fearsome sounds upon the little station, life there was lonelier than ever

1897

Konovalov

As I was glancing through the paper I came upon the name of Konovalov, it instantly caught my attention, and this is what I read

Last night in cell 3 of the local jail, a man from Murom named Alexander Ivanovich Konovalov, aged 40, hanged himself from the damper knob of the chimney The suicide had been arrested in Pskov for vagrancy and was being returned to his native town The prison authorities assert that he was a quiet, peaceable, contemplative man His suicide, according to the report of the prison doctor, is to be attributed to melancholia "

As I read this brief notice, I felt that I could throw more light on the reasons which had induced this quiet, contemplative man to put an end to his life I knew him Perhaps it was my duty to speak he was a splendid person and one does not meet such people often in this world

I was eighteen when I made the acquaintance of Konovalov At that time I worked in a bakery as the baker's assistant The baker was a soldier from the "music squad", a prodigious drinker who often spoiled the dough When drunk he would play tunes on his lips or drum them out with his fingers on anything that came to hand If the owner of the bakery flew at him for spoiling the bread or not having it ready by morning, he would become furious, would curse the owner roundly and try to make him realise it was a *musician* he was dealing with

"Spoiled the dough!" he would shout, his long red moustache bristling, his thick wet lips slapping together loudly "Burnt the crust! Soggy! To hell with you, you cross-eyed hyena! Do you think I was born for such work? To hell with you and your work! I'm a musician, I'll have you know It used to be if the viola got drunk, I played the

viola, if the oboe was arrested, I played the oboe, if the cornet got sick, who took his place? Me! Tum tarra tum tum! Bah, you miserable *katsap*! I'm quitting!"

And the owner, a puffy, flabby man with short fat legs, a womanish face, and eyes of different colour, would stamp his feet till his belly shook and shriek

"You thief! You murderer! You Christ selling Judas!" And he would raise his hands over his head with the stubby fingers spread wide apart and shriek even louder "And what if I turn you over to the police as a rebel?"

"Me, the servant of the tsar and the country, turned over to the police?" the soldier would bawl back, and then he would advance slowly on the owner, brandishing his fists The owner would back away snorting and spitting in rage, there was nothing else for him to do good bakers were not to be found in that Volga town in summer

Such scenes took place almost daily The soldier drank, spoiled the dough, and played marches and waltzes "numbers", as he called them, the boss grit his teeth, while I, as a result of all this, had to do the work of two

And so I was very glad when the following scene took place between the owner and the soldier

"Well, soldier," said the boss as he came into the bakery, his face beaming, a look of triumph in his eyes, "well, soldier, poke out your lips and sing a march "

"What's that?" said the soldier glumly from where he lay on the bin, drunk as usual

"Get ready to set out on a march," exulted the owner

"Where to?" asked the soldier, dropping his legs over the edge of the bench and sensing that something was wrong

"Wherever you like "

"What d'ye mean?" barked the soldier

"I mean I'm not keeping you any longer Take your pay and forward, march! To the four corners of the earth "

The soldier, who was used to bullying the boss because he was sure he could not do without him, was sobered by this announcement, he knew only too well that it would be hard

for one with his poor knowledge of the trade to find another job

"Come now, you're fooling," he said anxiously, struggling to his feet

"Get along, get along"

"Get along?"

"Clear out"

"Worked out, eh?" said the soldier, with a bitter shake of his head "You've sucked my blood sucked me dry and now you throw me out Slick of you, you spider"

"Me, a spider?" seethed the boss

"Yes, you A blood sucking spider, that's what you are," said the soldier with conviction, and went staggering towards the door

The boss gave a nasty laugh as he watched him go, and there was a gay sparkle in his eyes

"Try and find somebody who'll take you on now! Nobody'll take you as a gift after what I've told them about you Not a soul"

"Have you found a new baker?" I asked

"The new one's an old one He was my helper once What a man! Worth his weight in gold But he's drunkard, too, tsk, tsk! Only he goes off on bouts He'll work like an ox for three or four months, won't sleep or rest or give a hang for the pay Just work and sing And when he sings it goes straight to your heart When he's had his fill of singing he'll go off on a bout"

The owner sighed and gave a hopeless wave of his hand

"Wild horses can't stop him once he's started He drinks till he's sick or stark naked And then, maybe because he's ashamed, he slinks off somewhere like an evil spirit that's caught a whiff of incense But here he is Have you come for good, Sasha?"

"For good," came a deep rich voice from the doorway

There with his shoulder against the jamb stood a tall broad shouldered man of about thirty His clothes were those of a typical tramp, his face that of a true Slav He was wearing a red calico shirt that was torn and indescribably

dirty, wide trousers of coarse linen, on one foot he had the remains of a rubber galosh, on the other a battered leather shoe His fair hair was tousled and bits of straw were entangled in it They were in his fair beard, too, which spread like a fan over his chest His pale, worn, longish face was lighted by a pair of large blue eyes with a gentle look in them His lips fine, but lacking colour smiled from underneath a blond moustache His smile was such that he seemed to be saying apologetically

"I'm just what I am, don't be too hard on me "

"Come in, Sasha, this is your helper," said the boss, rubbing his hands together as he gazed admiringly at the powerful physique of the new baker, who advanced without a word and held out an enormous hand We exchanged greetings He sat down on a bench, stretched out his legs, stared at his feet, and said to the owner

"Buy me two shirts, Vassily Semyonovich, and a pair of shoes And some linen for a cap "

"You'll have everything, don't worry I've got caps, and I'll bring the shirts and trousers this evening Meanwhile, get to work, I know what a good fellow you are, and you'll have no reason to complain of me Nobody could treat Konovalov bad because he never treats anybody bad himself I've got a heart, even if I am your boss I used to work once myself, and I know horse radish draws tears Well, I'll be leaving you, fellows "

And he left us alone

Konovalov sat there without a word, looking about him with a smile on his face

The bakery was in a basement with a vaulted ceiling, and its three windows were below street level There was little light and little air, but plenty of dirt, dampness, and flour dust Three big bins stood against the wall, one of them empty, another with ready dough in it, the third with dough that was being leavened Across each of them fell a pale shaft of light from the window Sacks of flour lay on the dirty floor beside a stove that took up nearly one third of the room, big logs burned furiously in the stove, and the

reflection of the flames flickering on the grey walls gave the impression that they were noiselessly chattering together

It was depressing to have that sooty vaulted ceiling hanging over our heads The fusion of daylight with the light from the stove produced a vague illumination that tired the eyes Dust and street sounds came pouring in a steady stream through the windows Konovalov took all this in, heaved a sigh, and said in an expressionless voice

"Been working here long?"

I told him We both fell silent and gazed at each other from under bent brows

"A regular prison," he said "Let's go outside and sit on the bench by the gate, shall we?"

We did

"A fellow can breathe out here It'll take me some time to get used to that hole I've just come from the sea, so you can judge for yourself Worked on the Caspian And all of a sudden to find yourself slapped down into a hole in the ground!"

He gave me a rueful smile and stopped talking, gazing hard at the people walking and riding past There was a sad light in his clear blue eyes Evening fell, the street was noisy, stuffy, dusty, the shadows of the houses crept across the road Konovalov sat leaning against the wall, his arms crossed on his chest, his fingers playing with his silky beard I stole a glance at his pale oval face and thought I wonder what he's like? But I did not dare speak to him because he was my chief, and also because he inspired me with respect

Three fine lines crossed his forehead, but from time to time they vanished, and I longed to know what this man was thinking about

"Come along, it's time You mix the second batch and I'll set the third "

When we had weighed out one lot of dough and mixed another, we sat down for a glass of tea Konovalov thrust his hand into his shirt and said to me

"Can you read? Here, read this," and he handed me a soiled and wrinkled piece of paper

I read:

"Dear Sasha,

"Greeting and a kiss by mail. I'm lonely and unhappy and I can't wait for the day when I'll go off with you or begin living with you. I'm sick and tired of this rotten life, even if I did like it at first. You understand why, and I began to understand, too, after I met you. Please write to me soon, I want awfully to hear from you. Good-bye for the present but not farewell, dear bearded friend of my heart. I won't scold you even if I am disappointed in you because you're a pig. You went away without even saying good-bye to me, but even so I was always happy with you and I never was with anybody else and I'll never forget it. Couldn't you try to have me taken off the list, Sasha? The girls told you I'd throw you over if I was off the list but that's all nonsense and an absolute lie. If you were only nice to me I'd be as faithful to you as a dog once I was off the list. You could do it easy but it's hard for me. When you came to see me I cried because I have to live such a life but I didn't tell you that was why.

"Good-bye,

"Your Capitolina."

Konovalov took the letter from me and began to turn it absently in one hand while he twisted his beard with the other.

"Do you know how to write?"

"I do."

"And have you any ink?"

"I have."

"Then write her a letter, will you? She probably thinks I'm a rotter—that I've forgotten all about her. Do write."

"I will, but who is she?"

"A prostitute. See, she's asking me to have her taken off the list. That means I'll have to promise the police to marry her; then they'll give her back her passport and take away her card and she'll be free, see?"

In half an hour a touching missive was ready.

"Well, read it; how does it sound?" asked Konovalov impatiently.

This is how it sounded

"Dear Capa,

"Don't think I'm low enough to have forgotten all about you I didn't forget, but I went on a bout and drank up everything I had But I'm working again, and tomorrow I'll get an advance from my boss and send it to Philip and he'll have you taken off the list I'll send enough to pay your fare here So long for the present

"Yours,

"Alexander

"Hm m," said Konovalov, scratching his head, "not much of a writer, you aren't No feeling in your letter, no tears And besides, I asked you to bawl me out in strong language, and you haven't "

"Why should I?"

"To let her know I'm ashamed of myself and realise how bad I treated her That's why This is dry as split peas Drop a tear or two "

There was nothing for it but to drop a tear or two, which I did effectively Konovalov was satisfied He put his hand on my shoulder and said enthusiastically

"Now everything's fine Thanks I can see you're a good sort You and I will get on together "

I had no doubt of this, and asked him to tell me about Capitolina

"Capitolina? She's young just a kid From Vyatka. A merchant's daughter She left the straight and narrow, and the further she went, the worse it got, and at last she landed in a brothel When I first saw her I thought, God! how could it have happened? She's just a baby We got to be good friends She'd cry I'd say, 'Don't worry, have patience, I'll get you out of here, just wait a while ' And I got everything ready, money and everything, and then all of a sudden I went off on a bout and found myself in Astrakhan And then here A certain chap let her know where I was, and she wrote me that letter "

"What are you thinking of doing marrying her?" I asked

"Me get married? How can a drunk get married? Oh, no, I'll just have her taken off the list and then she'll be free to go wherever she likes She'll find some place to fit into and maybe turn out to be a decent woman "

"She wants to live with you "

"She's just kidding Thev're all like that, the women I know them through and through, I've had lots of them Even had a merchant's wife once I was working as a groom in a circus when she laid eyes on me 'Come and be our coachman,' she said I was fed up with the circus, so I agreed Well, one thing led to another They had a big house, with horses and servants, and all the rest Lived like lords Her husband was short and fat, like our boss, but she was slim and graceful as a cat, and a hot little parcel She'd hug me tight and kiss me on the mouth, and her kisses were like hot coals Make you tremble all over, and scare the life out of you There she'd be, kissing me and sobbing so hard that her shoulders shook 'What's the matter, Vera?' I'd say 'You're like a child, Sasha, you don't understand a thing,' she'd answer She was a sweet little woman, and it's the truth what she said, I really don't understand anything I'm a blockhead and I know it I don't understand why I do what I do, and I never give a thought to how I live "

He stopped speaking and gazed at me with wide-open eyes filled with an expression that was half fear, half wonder some sense of alarm that heightened the sadness of his handsome face, making it still handsomer

"And how did your affair with the merchant's wife end?" I asked

"You see, every once in a while I feel so miserable I just can't bear to go on living It's as if I was the only creature in the whole wide world, as if there wasn't another living thing but me anywhere on earth And at such times I hate everybody, myself and everyone else I wouldn't give a damn if everybody died It must be some sickness in me That's what started me drinking So I went to her and said, 'Let me go, Vera Mikhailovna, I can't stand it any longer ' 'Why, have you grown tired of me?' she asks and gives an

unpleasant laugh 'It's not you I've grown tired of, it's myself,' I said At first she didn't understand and she began to shout and scold me But when she came to understand, she just dropped her head and said, 'Go along, then ' And she cried She had black eyes and her hair was black, too, and curly She came from a family of clerks, not merchants I felt sorry for her and hated myself Of course it was hard for her to live with such a husband He was like a sack of flour She cried for a long time she had got used to me by then I was very tender to her sometimes I'd take her up in my arms and rock her like a baby She'd fall asleep and I'd sit and look at her A person can look very pretty asleep so sweet and simple, just breathes and smiles and nothing else Sometimes we'd go for a drive, when we were living in the country in the summer She liked to drive like the wind When we'd get to the woods we'd tie the horse to a tree and lie down in the shade She'd make me put my head in her lap while she read a book to me I'd listen until I fell asleep They were good stories she read, very good I'll never forget one of them about a mute named Gerasim and his dog [1] This mute was an outcast, nobody loved him but his dog When people made fun of him, he'd go and seek comfort with his dog A very sad story He was a serf, this Gerasim, and one day his mistress says to him, 'Go and drown your dog, Gerasim, it's always howling ' So off he went He took a boat, put the dog in it, and pushed off I'd start shivering whenever she got to that place God, think of making a man kill a creature that was his only joy! What sort of a thing was that to do? A wonderful story, and true to life that's what made it so good There are people like that some one thing is the whole world to them This dog, for instance Why the dog? Because nobody else loved him, but the dog did, and a man can't live without love of some kind why else was he given a heart to love with? She read me lots of stories A sweet little woman, and to this day I feel sorry for her If it wasn't for the star I was born under, I wouldn't have left her until she asked me to, or until her husband found out about us. A loving soul, that's the main thing, and it wasn't the gifts

she gave me that showed her lovingness, the very heart of her was loving She kissed me and all the rest, like any other woman, but sometimes a great quietness would come over her, and then it was wonderful how good she was She'd look straight into my very soul and talk to me like a mother, and I'd feel about five years old And even so I left her The misery The misery kept dragging me off somewhere 'Good bye, Vera Mikhailovna, and forgive me,' I said 'Good bye, Sasha,' she said and then, the crazy woman, she pulled my sleeve up and sank her teeth into my flesh I almost cried out She nearly bit a chunk out of my arm it took three weeks to heal I still wear the marks "

He bared his muscular arm, white and well formed, and held it out, a sad and gentle smile on his lips The scar was plainly to be seen near the elbow joint two semi-circles with their ends almost meeting The smiling Konovalov shook his head as he looked at them

"The crazy woman That's what she gave me to remember her by "

I had heard such stories before Almost every tramp will tell you about some "merchant's wife" or "gentlewoman" with whom he has had an affair And with everyone the gentlewoman or merchant's wife has assumed so many aspects in the countless tales told about her that she has become a fantastic personality, and one comprising the most contradictory aspects of body and soul If today she is gay, quick tempered and blue-eyed, next week she will be kindly, sentimental and black-eyed Usually the tale is recounted cynically, with innumerable details intended to humiliate the woman

But I detected a note of truthfulness in Konovalov's account, which contained elements I had never heard before, such as the reading of books and the comparing of himself, a strong and powerful man, to a child

I imagined this slip of a woman sleeping in his arms, her head resting on his broad chest There was something beautiful in the picture, and this helped to convince me of its

truth. And in the end, there was the sad and gentle tone—a very special tone—in which he gave his reminiscences of the "merchant's wife". A true tramp never speaks of women or anything else in such a tone; on the contrary, he boasts that there is nothing on earth he holds sacred.

"Why don't you say something? Do you think I'm lying?" asked Konovalov, and there was anxiety in his voice. He was sitting on a sack of flour holding a glass of tea in one hand and slowly stroking his beard with the other. His blue eyes bored into me inquiringly and the lines on his forehead were very marked.

"It's all the truth. Why should I lie? Oh, I know we roughs like to spin yarns. And why shouldn't we? If a fellow's never known anything worth while in life, why shouldn't he make up a fairy-tale and give it out as the truth? It don't do anybody any harm. He comes to believe it himself as he tells it—as if it really did happen that way. Believes it, and—well, it makes him feel good. Lots of people keep going that way. Can't be helped. But what I told you's the honest truth—that's exactly what happened. Is there anything strange about it? Here's a woman who's not getting any joy out of life. What if I am only a coachman? It makes no difference to a woman—coachmen, gentlemen, officers—we're all the male sex. And all pigs in her eyes—all after the same thing and each of us trying to get it as cheap as possible. The simpler the man, the more conscience he's got, and I'm the simplest of the simple. Women always see that in me—they see I'll never do them harm and never laugh at them. When a woman sins, there's nothing she fears so much as being laughed at, being made sport of. A woman has more sense of shame than we have. When we've had our fun, we're ready to brag about it even in the market-place: you ought to see what a fool of a skirt I caught last night. But a woman can't brag. Nobody thinks she's clever for sinning. The very lowest of them has more sense of shame than we have."

As I listened, I thought: strange sentiments coming from a man like him; can he mean it?

I grew even more astonished as he went on talking, gazing at me with his clear child like eyes

The wood in the stove burnt out, leaving a heap of bright coals that cast a rosy glow on the wall of the bakery

The window framed a square of blue sky set with two stars. One of them, very large, had an emerald sparkle, the other, quite close to it, was very faint

In a week's time Konovalov and I had become fast friends

"You're a simple sort, and that's what I like," he said with a wide grin, slapping me on the back with an enormous hand

He was an artist at his job You should have seen him tossing the seven pood lump of dough about as he rolled it, or bending over the bin to knead it, his arms buried to the elbow in the resilient mass which gave off a thin squeak as he pressed it in steel fingers

I scarcely had time to empty a form on to his long handled tray before he thrust it into the oven At first I was afraid he would place the loaves too close together in his haste, but when he had baked three batches and not one of the hundred and twenty loaves (all well browned and light as a feather) had "collapsed", I realised he was a master workman He loved his work, took it to heart, became fretful if the oven did not heat or the dough was slow in rising, scolded the boss whenever he bought flour of a poor grade, and took a child like joy and satisfaction in having the loaves come out perfectly round and fluffy, baked to a turn, with a crisp crust Sometimes he would take the most perfect loaf off the tray and say laughingly, as he tossed it, steaming, from hand to hand

"Just see what a pretty thing we've made, you and me!"

It was a pleasure for me to watch this overgrown boy at work, he put so much spirit into it a thing everyone should do, no matter what his job

One day I said to him

"Sasha, they say you can sing"

"I can But I don't sing any old time I sing in spells so to speak I start when I get the misery Or if I begin singing first the misery's sure to follow But don t talk about it and don t tease me What about you don t you sing? Oh you do! Well don't start till I get round to it Then we ll sing together, shall we?"

I agreed to wait, and would whistle whenever I felt an urge to sing But sometimes I would forget and begin to hum to myself as I kneaded or rolled the dough Konovalov would listen, his lips moving and then remind me of my promise Occasionally he shouted at me roughly

"Shut up! Stop wailing!"

One day I took a book out of my box and sat at the window to read

Konovalov was dozing on a bin, but the rustle of the paper above his head as I turned the pages made him open his eyes

"What's your book about?"

It was *The Podlipovtes*

"Read it to me, will you?" he asked

Sitting there on the window sill I began to read out loud, and he sat up and put his head against my knee as he listened From time to time I glanced over the book and met his eyes, and to this day they are impressed on my memory wide-open, full of tense, concentrated attention His mouth, too, was open, showing two rows of even white teeth It was an inspiration to see his uplifted eyebrows, the broken lines furrowing his high forehead, the hands gripping his knees, his whole form, so still and attentive It made me try to put as much expression as possible into my reading of the sad tale of Pila and Sysoika.[2]

At last I grew tired and closed the book

"Is that all?" asked Konovalov in a whisper

"Less than half "

"Will you read it all to me?"

"If you want me to "

"Ah!" he said, taking his head in his hands and swaying from side to side There was something he wanted to say and

he opened and shut his mouth, puffing like a pair of bellows, and narrowing his eyes. I had not expected the reading to have such an effect on him and did not understand what it meant.

"How you read that!" he whispered, "In different voices, each person as if he was alive. Aproska. Pila. What fools they were! Very comical. What comes next? Where will they go? Jesus why, it's all *true*, they're real people, honest-to-goodness muzhiks, with true-to-life voices and faces and all the rest. Listen, Maxim, when we've put the bread in the oven, let's read some more."

We put the bread in the oven, got ready another batch, and then I read for another hour and a half. When the bread was ready we stopped again, took it out, put other loaves in, kneaded fresh dough and mixed some yeast. All this we did in feverish haste and almost without speaking. From time to time the frowning Konovalov would snap out monosyllabic instructions to me as he rushed ahead with the work.

It was morning when we finished the book, and my tongue was stiff and sore.

Konovalov was sitting on a sack of flour and looking at me without a word, a strange expression in his eyes, his hands gripping his knees.

"Did you like it?" I asked.

He nodded, screwing up his eyes, and when he spoke it was in a whisper again.

"Who wrote it?" His eyes were full of a wonder not to be expressed in words, and suddenly his face was lighted by an upsurge of strong feeling.

I told him who had written the book.

"What a man! He caught it just right, didn't he? It almost makes you afraid. Makes the shivers run up and down your spine, it's so true to life. What about him—that writer-fellow—what did he get for doing it?"

"That is...?"

"Didn't they give him something—a prize or something?"

"Why should they give him a prize?" I asked.

"Well, a book—it's like a police proclamation: people read it and begin talking about it. About what Pila and Sysoika were like, for instance. Nobody could help feeling sorry for them, living in such darkness. A dog's life. And so...."

"And so what?"

Konovalov glanced at me self-consciously.

"There ought to be some measures taken," he said meekly. "They're human beings. Somebody ought to help them."

I made a long speech in reply, but alas! it did not make the impression I hoped it would.

Konovalov grew thoughtful, dropped his head, sighed, and rocked back and forth, but not once did he interrupt me. I grew tired at last and stopped.

He raised his head and looked at me sadly.

"So they didn't give him a thing?" he said.

"Who?" I asked, having quite forgotten about the author.

"That writer-fellow."

I did not answer, annoyed because he evidently considered himself incapable of grappling with philosophical problems.

Konovalov took up the book, turned it reverently in his hands, opened it, shut it, put it down, and gave a sigh.

"What a funny thing!" he said in a low voice. "Here's a man writes a book ... nothing but paper with little marks on it ... writes it, and ... is this man dead?"

"Yes," I said.

"He's dead, but his book is here and people read it. A person looks at it with his eyes and pronounces different words. And another person listens and finds out that there once lived people named Pila, Sysoika and Aproska. And he feels sorry for them, even though he never set eyes on them and they're just—just nothing to him. Maybe he passes dozens of live people like them in the street every day without knowing anything about them, and it makes

no difference to him he doesn't even notice them But when he meets them in a book his heart fairly bursts with pity for them How do you explain that? So that writer fellow died without any reward, did he? Just nothing at all?"

I grew angry and told him how writers were rewarded

Konovalov looked at me with frightened eyes and clicked his tongue to show his sympathy

"A fine state of affairs," he sighed then hung his head and chewed the left end of his moustache

I began to speak about the fatal role of the pub in the life of Russian men of letters, I told him about the truly great and profound writers who have been ruined by vodka, to which they turned as their only comfort in a life full of misery

"Do such people drink?" asked Konovalov in an awed whisper In his wide eyes I read distrust of what I had said and fear and pity for those men 'Do they really drink' I suppose it's after they write their books that they take to drink, isn't it?"

Not finding much point to this question, I ignored it

"After of course," decided Konovalov "These writer fellows are like sponges that suck up other people's sorrow They have a special kind of eyes for this And hearts too If they look at life for a long time it gives them the misery And they pour it out into their books But that don t help because their hearts are touched, and you can't even burn out the misery, once it's in your heart So there's only one thing left to drown it out in vodka That's why they drink Am I right?"

I said he was, and this seemed to encourage him

"But to be fair," he went on delving deeper into the psychology of a writer, "they ought to be rewarded? Because they understand more than other people and point out to others what is wrong with life Take me for instance—what am I? A tramp a drunkard, a good for nothing There's no sense in a life like mine What's the point of my living in this world? Who needs me, when you come to it? No wife, no

children, no place to call my own, and not even any hankering after them I just live on in my misery, nobody knows why There's nothing inside me to point the way How shall I put it? No spark in my soul no strength, perhaps Whatever you call it it's just not there, and that's that So I go on living and searching for that something, and longing for it, but what it is, I don't know "

He looked at me, his head resting on his hand, his face reflecting the thoughts striving to take shape in his mind

"Well?" I urged

"Well I don't know how to put it but I think if one of those writer fellows came along and had a look at me, he might be able to explain my life, mightn't he? What do you think?"

I thought that I myself could do this, and instantly undertook to give what I thought a very clear and simple explanation I spoke about circumstances and environment, about inequality, about those who were the lords of life, and those who were its victims

Konovalov listened attentively He was sitting opposite me, his cheek in his hand, and gradually a veil seemed to be drawn over his big blue eyes that were wide-open and bespoke a thoughtful nature, the lines in his forehead deepened, and he scarcely seemed to breathe, so intense was his effort to grasp what I was saying

This flattered me With great fervour I drew a picture of his life for him, arguing that he was not to blame for what he was He was a victim of circumstances, a person who, equal to all others by nature, had been made a social nonentity by a chain of injustices stretching far back in history I finished by saying

"You have nothing to blame yourself for You have been wronged "

He said nothing, just sat there with his eyes fixed on me I could see a mocking smile forming in their depths, and I waited impatiently to hear what he would say

With a soft laugh he leaned toward me and put his hand on my shoulder in a soft feminine gesture

"How easy you explain it, pal. Where did you get all that? Out of books? You've certainly read a lot. If only I'd read that much! But the main thing is, you feel sorry for people. I've never heard anyone talk like that before. A strange thing—most people blame others for the wrongs they suffer, but you blame the whole of life, the whole system. According to you, a man isn't to blame for anything himself; if he was born to be a tramp, a tramp he'll be. And what you say about thieves is very queer: they steal because they have no work and have to get food somehow. Very generous you are. You've got a damned soft heart."

"Wait a minute," I said. "Do you agree with me? Do you think what I said is right or not?"

"You should know better than me whether it's right or not. You can read. If you take other folks, I guess you're right, but if you take me...."

"Well?"

"I'm a special case. Who's to blame for me being a drunkard? My brother Pavel don't drink. He's got his own bakery in Perm. I'm a better workman than he is, yet I'm a tramp and a drunkard, and there's nothing you can say for me. Yet we were both born of the same mother. He's even younger than I am. So you see there must be something wrong with me. I must have been born wrong. You say all people are equal. But I'm a special case. And not only me—there are lots of others like me. We're special people—don't fit into any picture. And we need special judgement. And special laws—hard laws, to drive us off the earth, because we don't do anybody any good; we only take up room and stand in other people's way. Who's to blame for that? We ourselves are to blame. Because we have no love of life, nor even of ourselves."

This enormous man with eyes as clear as a baby's dismissed himself so lightly, branded himself as worthless and therefore to be driven off the earth with such a heartrending smile, that I was dumbfounded. Never before had I found the quality of self-abnegation in a tramp, most of whom are by their very nature isolated from everything

about them, hostile to everything, and only too eager to make everything the target of sneering spitefulness The people I had met thus far were always blaming others, always lodging complaints, stubbornly closing their eyes to the undeniable evidence contradicting their claims to impeccability They invariably attributed their failures to the cruelty of fate or the wickedness of others Konovalov did not blame fate or accuse others He alone was to blame for the mess his life had become, and the harder I tried to prove to him that he was "a victim of circumstances and environment", the stronger he insisted that he alone was to blame for his state This was an original approach, but it infuriated me He found pleasure in chastising himself, it was pleasure that gleamed in his eyes as he cried out in his resounding voice

"Every man is his own master, and nobody but me is responsible if I am a rascal!"

I would not have been surprised to hear a cultivated person say such a thing, for all sorts of diseases affect that elaborate psychic organism known as "an intellectual" But it was strange to hear it coming from the lips of this rough, albeit he was an intellectual among those wronged, hungry, naked, resentful half men and half beasts who are to be found in the festering slums of our cities There was nothing for it but to conclude that Konovalov was indeed "a special case", but I did not wish to

In outward appearance he was, down to the slightest detail, a typical tramp, but the better I got to know him, the more convinced I became that here was a type at variance with what I believed tramps to be a group that might almost be considered a class, uncommonly vigorous as well as vicious, and by no means stupid

Our argument waxed hotter

"Listen," I cried, "how can a man stand on his feet when all sorts of dark forces are pressing him down on all sides?"

"Let him hold on tighter," said my opponent vehement ly, his eyes flashing

"Hold on to what?"

"Let him find something and hold on to it."

"Why don't you?"

"You funny duck! Didn't I tell you I myself was to blame? I haven't found anything to hold on to. I keep looking for it and longing for it, but I can't find it."

But it was time to think of the bread, and we set to work, still trying to prove to each other the correctness of our points of view. Of course we proved nothing, and when our work was over, we lay down, tired and overwrought.

Konovalov flung himself on the floor and was soon asleep. I lay on some sacks of flour, from which vantage point I looked down upon his powerful bearded form, stretched like a storied hero on some bast matting near one of the bins. There was a smell of hot bread, sour dough and burning logs in the room. Gradually it grew light, and a grey sky glanced through the flour-dusted window-panes. A cart squeaked past and a cowherd blew his horn to gather the herd.

Konovalov snored. As I watched the rise and fall of his massive chest I tried to think of a quick means of converting him to my creed, but I dozed off before I had succeeded.

In the morning we got up, mixed the yeast, washed ourselves, and sat down on a bench to drink tea.

"Have you got any other books?" asked Konovalov.

"Yes."

"Will you read them to me?"

"All right."

"Good. Look here, I'll go on working for a month, get my pay from the boss and give you half."

"What for?"

To buy books. Buy whatever you like for yourself, and buy me—maybe two. Books about muzhiks. People like Pila and Sysoika. But see they're written with feeling, not cold and empty. Some books are just rubbish. Take that "Panfilka and Filatka"—trash, even if it has got a picture on the front. Or about the Poshekhontsy and other fairy-tales. I don't like such stuff. I never knew there were books like the one you read me."

"Would you like me to read to you about Stenka Razin?"

"*Stenka? Is it good?*"

"*Very.*"

"Let's have it."

And so I began reading him Kostomarov's *Stenka Razin's Uprising.*[5] At first this talented monograph, almost an epic poem, was not to the taste of my bearded listener.

"Why isn't there any talk in it?" he asked, glancing into the book. While I was explaining he tried to hide a yawn. This made him feel ashamed, and he said *guiltily*:

"Go ahead and read. Don't mind me."

But as, with the skill of an artist, the historian drew the portrait of Stepan Razin, and this "prince of the Volga freemen" rose imposingly from the pages of the book, Konovalov underwent a transformation. Hitherto bored, indifferent and heavy-eyed, he gradually and without my noticing it appeared before me in an astonishing new aspect. From where he sat on the bin opposite me, his arms encircling his knees, his chin on his knees so that his beard flowed down over his legs, he devoured me with burning eyes that looked out from under drawn brows. There was not a sign of that child-like naïveté that I found so surprising in him, and all the simplicity, the feminine gentleness that went so well with his kindly blue eyes—now dark and slit-like—had disappeared. There was something flaming, something leonine, in his body, which had become a bundle of taut muscles. I stopped reading.

"Go on," he said quietly but firmly.

"What's the matter?"

"Go on!" he repeated, and his request was tinged with irritation.

I went on, and I could see as I glanced up at him from time to time that he was growing more and more excited. He emanated something—a sort of hot vapour—that stimulated, even intoxicated me. At last I came to the place where Stenka is captured.

"So they caught him!" cried Konovalov.

The cry was full of pain, wrath, resentment.

Beads of sweat stood out on his forehead and his eyes were strangely dilated. He jumped up off the bin and stood in front of me, tall and trembling.

"Wait. Stop reading," he said quickly, putting his hand on my shoulder. "Tell me what will happen next. No, don't tell me. Will they kill him? Read on, Maxim, quick."

One might have thought that Konovalov and not Frolka was Razin's brother. It seemed that there were blood ties undissolved by the passage of three hundred years binding this tramp to Stenka. With all the force of his strong and vigorous body, with all the passion of a soul yearning for "something to hold on to", he was experiencing the pain and wrath the freedom-loving rebel had known on being captured three centuries before.

"Go on reading, for Christ's sake!"

I read on, deeply agitated, conscious of the beating of my own heart, sharing with Konovalov the pain that Stenka suffered. Soon we came to the place where he is tortured.

Konovalov set his jaws and his blue eyes flashed fire. He leaned over my shoulder, keeping his eyes glued to the page. His breath was loud in my ear and it blew my hair into my eyes. I tossed it back. Seeing this, Konovalov laid a heavy palm on my head.

"Then Razin clenched his teeth so hard that they fell out, and he spat them out with the blood on the floor...."

"Stop! To hell with it!" cried Konovalov, and he snatched the book out of my hands and threw it on the floor with all his might, he himself sinking down beside it.

He cried, and since he was ashamed to cry, he growled to disguise the sobs. He hid his head between his knees and cried, wiping his eyes on his dirty cotton trousers.

I sat on the bench in front of him, unable to find words of comfort.

"Maxim!" said Konovalov from where he sat on the floor. "Think of it! Pila ... Sysoika ... and now Stenka. What an end. Think of spitting your teeth out like that!"

A shudder passed over him.

He was especially shocked by Stenka's spitting out his teeth, and kept coming back to it, giving nervous little jerks of his shoulders as he mentioned it.

Our heads reeled under the impression of the brutal picture of human torture that had been presented to us.

"Read it to me again, will you?" coaxed Konovalov, picking up the book and handing it to me. "Here, show me where that place about the teeth is."

I pointed it out to him and he fixed his eyes on the lines.

"Is that really what's written: he spat out his teeth with the blood? The letters here are just like all the others. God! how it must have hurt him, eh? Even his teeth. And what will come later? Will they kill him? Thank God they'll kill him in the end!"

His joy was expressed with intense feeling, with a look of supreme satisfaction in his eyes, and I shuddered at the contemplation of a compassion so ardently desiring the death of the tortured Stenka.

We lived in a daze for the rest of the day, speaking only of Stenka, recalling the events of his life, the songs written about him, the tortures he underwent. Twice Konovalov began singing one of these songs in his rich baritone, but both times he broke off in the middle.

From that day he and I were even closer friends.

I read *Stenka Razin's Uprising*, *Taras Bulba* and *Poor People*[4] to him several times. My listener was greatly impressed by *Taras Bulba*, but it could not eclipse the deep impression made on him by Kostomarov's book. He could not understand Makar Devushkin and Varya. He found the language of Makar's letters ridiculous, and was sceptical in his attitude towards Varya.

"Just see how she makes up to that old man! Sly of her—making up to a scarecrow like him. But stop wasting time on that junk, Maxim. What's there in it? Him writes to her, her writes to him—nothing but a waste of paper. To hell with them. Nothing funny, nothing sad in it; what's it written for?"

I said they resembled the Podlipovites but he disagreed

"Pila and Sysoika that's different They're real people living and suffering But what are these? All they do is write letters Boring They're not even live people just made up Take Taras and Stenka God, if they ever got together wouldn't they do things! They'd put new life into Pila and Sysoika!"

He had a muddled conception of time and supposed that all his favourite characters were contemporaries, two of them living in Usolye,[5] one in the Ukraine, the fourth on the Volga I had difficulty in convincing him that if Sysoika and Pila had sailed down the Volga they would not have found Stenka, and if Stenka had ever crossed the Don steppe and reached the Ukraine, he would not have found Bulba there

Konovalov was disappointed on learning the truth I told him something about the Pugachev uprising anxious to see what he would think of Pugachev Konovalov would have none of him

'A dirty swindler, that's what he was Hid behind the tsar's name to stir up the people How many good men died because of him! Stenka? He was different That Pugachev was a skunk and nothing more Got any more books like the one about Stenka? Look and see But drop that idiot of a Makar, he's not interesting I'd rather hear you read how they killed Stenka again"

On our days off Konovalov and I would go to the meadows across the river We would take some vodka and bread and a book, and set out in the morning for "our airing", as Konovalov called it

We were especially fond of going to the 'glass works"[6] That, for some inexplicable reason, was the name given to a building standing in an open field not far from the town It was brick, three storeyed, with a caved in roof, broken windows, and a cellar filled with foul-smelling water all summer long Ramshackled, grey green, with a festering look, it stood there in the field gazing at the town out of the dark sockets of its shattered windows for all the world like a dying cripple who has been banished from town Year after

year the spring floods reached it, but it remained standing, mouldy from top to bottom, surrounded by pools of water that protected it from frequent visits by the police. Despite its caved-in roof, it offered shelter to all sorts of vagabonds.

There were always lots of them there. Ragged, half-starved, shrinking from sunlight, they lived like owls among the ruins. Konovalov and I were always welcome guests, because on leaving the bakery we would each take a loaf of white bread and buy a half-pint of vodka and a hawker's trayful of "stew"—liver, lungs, heart and tripe. For only two or three rubles we provided the "glass-folk", as Konovalov called them, with a fine meal.

In exchange for our treat they would tell us stories in which the horrible soul-stirring truth was fantastically interwoven with the most obvious falsehood. Each story was a bit of black lace (the truth), stitched with bright colours (the lies). This lace twisted itself about heart and brain, strangling them in its harsh, diverse patterns. The "glass-folk" grew attached to us in their way. I often read to them, and they usually listened with thoughtful attention.

I was struck by the profound knowledge of life shown by these people whom life had thrown overboard, and I eagerly listened to their stories. Konovalov listened, too, but only so that he could contradict their philosophical views and draw me into an argument.

When one of these creatures, dressed fit to kill, and with a physiognomy suggesting that one would do well to keep one's distance, told the story of his life and ruin (which invariably became a speech in self-defence and self-justification) Konovalov would smile musingly and shake his head. They noticed this.

"Don't you believe me, Sasha?" the one who had told the story would demand.

"Of course, I believe you. You've got to believe what a man says. Even if you know he's lying, believe him; listen to him and try to find out what makes him lie. Sometimes a man's lies show you what he is better than the truth. And what are our lives like, when you get down to it? Just

plain muck So we dress them up by telling lies Am I right?"

"You're right," his interlocutor would agree "But why did you shake your head?"

"Because you don't look at things right You talk as if it wasn't you yourself who made you what you are but the first bloke who came along Why did you let him? Why didn't you put up a fight? We're always complaining about other people, but we're men, too, aren't we? And so we can be complained of, too If somebody's always getting in our way, we're probably getting in somebody else's way, isn't that so? How can you explain that?"

"Life ought to be made over so that there would be plenty of room for everybody and nobody would get in anybody else's way," they answered

"Who's to make it over?" he demanded challengingly, and hastened to answer before anyone else could, "We are We ourselves But how are we to make it over if we don't know how? If we can't make anything worth while out of our *own* lives? It turns out we have no one to turn to but ourselves, and as for ourselves well, we all know what *we* are "

They objected and tried to find excuses for themselves, but he stubbornly stuck to his point each man is responsible for what he is and nobody else is to be blamed for his failure

It was quite impossible to budge him from this position, and just as impossible to accept his view of people On the one hand, they were, in his opinion, fully capable of remaking life so that all should enjoy freedom, and on the other, they were a weak, spineless lot, incapable of doing anything but complain of each other

Often these arguments, begun at noon, ended at midnight, and Konovalov and I would return from the "glass-folk" in pitch darkness and up to our knees in mud

Once we were nearly sucked down into a bog, another time we got caught in a police raid and spent the night in the station along with some twenty of our pals from the "glass works" who had roused the suspicion of the police

Sometimes we had no desire to philosophise, and then the two of us would walk far out over the meadows on the other side of the river until we came to some small lakes teeming with little fish deposited there by the spring floods. For the sole purpose of enhancing the beauty of the scene we would build a fire in the bushes lining the shore of one of these lakes and then read or talk about life Sometimes Konovalov would say whimsically

"Maxim, let's just look at the sky "

And we would lie on our backs and gaze into the fathomless blue vault above us. At first we were conscious of the rustling of the leaves and the rippling of the water and felt the ground beneath us. But slowly the blue sky seemed to draw us up into it, we lost all sense of existence, and as if taking off from the earth, floated out in the heavenly expanses in a state of drowsy contemplation which we feared to disturb by word or movement.

Thus would we lie for hours at a time, and would return to work with new strength, physically and spiritually refreshed

Konovalov loved nature with a profound, inarticulate love, and whenever he was in the fields or on the river he would fall into a serene and gentle mood which increased his resemblance to a child Occasionally he would say with a deep sigh, as he gazed at the sky

"Ah, this is the thing!"

And there was more thought and feeling in this single exclamation than in the effusions of many poets, especially those who are inspired rather by the desire to be looked upon as people of exquisite sensibilities, than by true adoration of the beauties of nature

Poetry, like everything else, loses its sacred simplicity when it is made a profession.

Thus, day by day, two months passed Konovalov and I did a great deal of talking and a great deal of reading I read him *Stenka Razin's Uprising* so often that he could tell the story in his own words, page by page, from beginning to

end. It became for him what a delightful fairy-tale is to an impressionable child. He named the objects used in his work after different characters in the book, and once when a bowl fell off the shelf and broke, he exclaimed angrily:

"Damn you, Captain Prozorovsky!"[7]

If the dough was slow in rising he called it "Frolka"; the yeast was "Stenka's thoughts"; while Stenka himself was synonymous for everything great and exceptional, though ill-starred and doomed to failure.

During all that time Capitolina, whose letter I had read and answered on the day I first met Konovalov, was rarely mentioned.

Konovalov sent her money through a certain Philip, asking him to speak to the police about her, but no reply came from either Philip or the girl.

And then suddenly one evening when we were getting the dough ready to put into the oven, the bakery door was opened and from the darkness of the damp passage came a girl's deep voice:

"I beg your pardon."

The tone was at once timid and bantering.

"Who do you want?" I asked.

Konovalov let one end of the tray fall on the floor and began to pull at his beard disconcertedly.

"Does baker Konovalov work here?"

Now she was standing in the doorway, and the light from the hanging lamp fell full on her head, which was swathed in a white woollen shawl. She had a round and pretty face with an uptilted nose and round cheeks that dimpled when her full red lips parted in a smile.

"He does," I answered.

"He does, he does!" broke in Konovalov joyfully, throwing down the other end of the tray and taking long strides to reach her.

"Sasha!" she gasped.

They threw their arms about each other, Konovalov bending almost double.

"How are you? When did you get here? Just think! Are

you free? Good! See, what did I tell you? Now you've got a clear path ahead Walk straight down it and don't be afraid of anything," said Konovalov impetuously, still standing in the doorway and keeping his arms about her shoulders and waist

"You carry on alone today, Maxim, while I look after the lady Where are you planning to stay, Capa?"

"Here, with you "

"Here? You can't stay here We bake bread here, and besides well, you just can't stay here Our boss is very strict We'll have to fix you up for the night somewhere else Maybe in a hotel Come along "

And out they went I stayed behind to do the baking and did not expect Konovalov back until morning, but to my great surprise he turned up in three hours My surprise increased when, on glancing into his face, I found him looking tired and dejected instead of beaming with happi ness as I thought he should be

"What's the matter?" I asked, wondering what could have thrown my friend into a mood so out of keeping with the circumstances

"Nothing," he answered gloomily, and after a moment's silence he spat fiercely

"But, after all " I insisted

"What's it to you?" he said wearily, lying down on the bench "'After all, after all After all she's a skirt "

It took a great deal of effort on my part to wring an explanation from him, but at last he gave it to me in approximately the following words

"A skirt, I tell you And if I wasn't such a damn fool all this would never have happened, understand? You keep saying women are human beings, too Of course they walk about on their hind legs, they don't chew grass, they know how to talk and laugh, but still they're not our kind Why? I don't know I just know they're not, that's all Take this Capitolina now, here's her line 'I want to live with you,' she says, 'like your wife I want to follow you around like your dog' Did you ever hear anything so crazy? 'Come now,

sweetheart,' I says, 'you're talking nonsense Judge for yourself how could you ever live with me? First of all, I'm a drunk Secondly, I haven't got a roof over my head Thirdly, I'm a tramp and can't live in one place a long time ' and so on giving lots of reasons But she says, 'To hell with your being a drunkard, all workmen are drunkards, but they have wives just the same, as for a roof over your head, once you have a wife you'll have a roof, and then you won't want to go roaming any more ' 'No, Capa,' I says, 'I can't see it your way because I know I'm not fit for that sort of life and I never will be ' But she says, 'Then I'll throw myself into the river ' 'You little fool!' I says, and then she lams into me 'You swine, you crook, deceiving me like this, you long legged louse!' she says, and goes on and on until I'm ready to run away Then she begins to cry Cries and keeps blaming me 'Why did you have them set me free if you didn't want me? Why did you have me leave that place,' she says, 'and what am I to do with myself now, you blasted fool?' Well, what am I to do with her?"

"But why *did* you have her come here?" I asked

"Why? You're a queer egg! Because I felt sorry for her Anybody'd feel sorry for a person he saw sinking in the mud But as for tying myself up and all that not on your life! I'll never agree to a thing like that What kind of a family man am I? If *that* was the thing I wanted to hold on to, I'd have got married long ago. What chances I've had! With a dowry and everything But how can I do such a thing if it's beyond my power? She cries all the time, and that, of course, is too bad But what am I to do? I just can't "

He shook his head in confirmation of his mournful "I just can't", got up off the bench and, rumpling his beard with both hands, began pacing the floor of the bakery with lowered head, spitting out his disgust from time to time

"Maxim!" he said, and there was supplication and embarrassment in his tone "Maybe you'll go and tell her how things stand, eh? That's a good chap."

"What shall I tell her?"

"Tell her the whole truth Say I can't do it, it's just not in me Or else say say I've got some bad disease "

"But that's not true," I laughed

"No, but it's a good excuse, isn't it? Damn it all, what a mess! What in the world would I ever do with a wife?"

He threw up his hands in a gesture of such blank despair that it was clear he had no use for a wife And though the way he put the story was comical, its dramatic side made me wonder what would happen to the girl He kept walking up and down and talking as if to himself

"And I don't like her any more not the least bit She keeps pulling at me, sucking me down like a bog Thinks she's found herself a husband Humph She's not very clever, but she's sly "

It was no doubt the vagabond instinct asserting itself, the irrepressible love of freedom that seemed to be under threat

"But I'm not to be caught with such poor bait! I'm a big fish, I am," he boasted "I'll show her, and and why shouldn't I?" He stopped in the middle of the room and fell to thinking, a smile playing over his lips As I watched his face, suddenly very animated, I tried to guess what he had decided to do

"Maxim! Let's hit it for the Kuban!"

This was unexpected I had been fostering certain literary-educational plans in regard to him I hoped to teach him to read and write and to pass on to him all the knowledge I had so far accumulated He had promised to remain here for the summer, a thing which would have facilitated my task, and now?

"You're talking nonsense," I said, put out.

"Then what am I to do?" he ejaculated

I tried to tell him Capitolina's intentions were not as serious as he seemed to think, and that he must wait and see what would happen

As it turned out, we had not long to wait.

We were sitting on the floor in front of the oven, our backs to the window It was nearly midnight, an hour and a

half or so since Konovalov had come back All of a sudden there was a sound of shattering glass and a fair sized cobblestone came rolling across the floor We both jumped up in fright and ran to the window

"Missed!" a woman's voice whined "A bad aim O-o-o, if only "

"C'mon," roared a deep bass voice "C'mon, I'll see to him later "

Through the broken window came hysterical drunken laughter, the laughter of desperation, so thin and high that it set one's teeth on edge

"It's her," said Konovalov miserably

I could see nothing but two legs dangling down into the window excavation There they hung, swinging, the heels striking against the brick wall as if seeking a foothold

"C'mon," muttered the man

"Let go! Stop pulling me! Let me have my say! Good bye, Sasha! Good bye " and what followed would not bear printing

I moved closer to the window so that I could see Capitolina. She was bending down holding on to the window frame, trying to see inside the bakery, and her loosened hair had fallen over her breast and shoulders Her white shawl had slipped off her head and the neck of her dress was ripped open Capitolina was drunk She swayed from side to side, hiccuping, swearing, shrieking hysterically, trembling, her clothes torn, her face flushed and wet with tears

A tall man was bending over her

"C'mon!" he kept shouting, one hand on her shoulder, the other on the wall of the house

"Sasha! You've been my ruin, remember that! God damn you, you red headed devil! I wish to God you'd never been born I counted on you, and you spit in my face All right, we'll settle accounts yet! Hiding from me are you? Ashamed of yourself, you pig faced monster! Sasha lovey "

"I'm not hiding from anybody," said Konovalov in a husky voice as he kneeled on the bench in front of the

window. "I'm not hiding. And you shouldn't say such things. I wanted to help you. I thought good would come of what I did, but you wanted something I just couldn't do."

"Sasha! Could you kill me?"

"Why did you get drunk? Who knows what tomorrow may bring?"

"Sasha! Sasha! Drown me!"

"Drop it! C'mon!" said the man's voice.

"You rotter! Why did you have to pretend to be decent?"

"What's the row about? Who are these people?"

The night watchman's whistle interrupted the talk, drowned it out, then broke off.

"Why did I ever trust you, you devil?" sobbed the girl at the window.

Suddenly her legs were drawn up and disappeared in the darkness. Blurred voices and the sounds of a struggle could be heard.

"Don't take me to the police-station! Sa-a-a-sha!" cried the girl desperately.

Heavy steps rang out on the pavement.

Whistles, muted grunts and cries.

"Sa-a-a-sha! Sasha ... dearie."

It was as if someone were being brutally tortured. All of this receded into the night, grew faint, fainter, and at last vanished like a bad dream.

Konovalov and I were so stunned by what had happened that we went on staring into the darkness, haunted by the memory of the cries, sobs, oaths, groans, and the shouts of the police. As I recalled certain of the sounds, I could not make myself believe all this had really happened—too swiftly had this brief but intense drama been enacted.

"The end," said Konovalov tersely and simply as he listened once more into the silence of the dark night which gazed with such calm severity through the window.

"The things she said to me!" he went on after a pause, still kneeling on the bench with his arms on the window-sill. "So she's been caught by the police. Drunk. And with that sot. It didn't take her long to make up her mind." He gave a

deep sigh, got off the bench, sat on a sack of flour, took his head in his hands and rocked from side to side.

"Tell me this, Maxim: how did it come about?" he said under his breath. "And what part did I play in this affair?"

I told him. I said that first of all a person ought to know what he wanted and ought to be able to foresee what a step would lead to before he took it. He had not known and had not foreseen, and so he was to blame for what had happened. I was furious with him. That drunken "C'mon" and the cries and groans of Capitolina still rang in my ears, and I showed my friend no mercy.

He heard me out with lowered head. When I had finished, he looked up, and I saw that he was shocked and frightened.

"How do you like that!" he ejaculated. "What'll happen next? How must I act? What am I to do with her?"

There was such child-like regret and perplexed helplessness in his admission of guilt that I instantly regretted for him and was sorry I had spoken so harshly.

"Why did I ever interfere?" he asked repentantly. "God, she must hate me! I'll go to the police-station and try to get her out. I'll see her and ... do what I can. I'll tell her ... something or other. Shall I go?"

I said I didn't think anything would come of their seeing each other. What could he tell her? Besides, she was drunk and probably sleeping by then.

But he was set on going.

"I'll go, all the same. After all, I *do* want to help her. Those people there don't give a damn for her. I'll go. You tend to things here. I'll be right back."

He pulled on his cap and went out, forgetting to put on the worn-out shoes that were his pride.

I did my work and went to sleep, and when I woke up in the morning and glanced, as usual, into the corner where Konovalov slept, he was not there.

It was evening when he put in an appearance—sullen, unkempt, with deep lines in his forehead and a shadow

darkening his blue eyes Without looking at me, he went over to the bins, inspected what I had done, and lay down on the floor without a word

"Did you see her?" I asked

"That's what I went for, isn't it?"

"Well, what happened?"

"Nothing "

Clearly he did not wish to talk I did not pry him with questions, sure that the mood would pass All the next day his conversation was limited to the brief words required by our work, he went about with his eyes on the ground and his glance shadowed as it had been when he came back Some light inside him seemed to have gone out He worked slowly and half heartedly, weighed down by his thoughts That night, when we had put the last batch of bread into the oven and were afraid to lie down for fear it would burn, he said to me

"Read something from 'Stenka' "

I began to read the description of Stenka's torture and execution, since this was the passage that roused his emotions more than any other He lay stretched out on his back on the floor, gazing without blinking at the soot covered ceiling arches

"So that's how they did away with a man," said Konovalov slowly "But even so it was easier to live then Freer At least there was something you could do Nowadays everything's quiet and peaceful very peaceful if you look at it from the outside Books and learning and all that But a man lives without anyone to stand by him and no one to look after him It's forbidden to do wrong, but it's impossible not to And so there's order outside, but a fine mix up inside And nobody can understand anybody else "

"How are things with you and Capitolina?" I asked

"What?" he replied, shaking himself "With Capa? All off," and he gave a resolute wave of his hand

"So you cut the strings?"

"Not me She did it herself "

"How?"

"Very simply Stuck to her point and wouldn't have it any other way So she's right back to where she was Only she used not to drink, and now she does You take out the bread, I'm going to sleep "

The bakery grew quiet The lamp smoked, from time to time there was a crackling sound in the flue, and the crust of the baked loaves standing on the shelves crackled, too The night watchmen stood talking outside our window, and another sound drifted in from time to time perhaps it was the creaking of our sign, perhaps it was someone groaning

I took out the bread and lay down, but I could not go to sleep, just lay there listening to the night sounds with half-closed eyes Suddenly I saw Konovalov get up without a sound, go over to the shelf, take Kostomarov's book, open it, and hold it to his eyes I could clearly see his thoughtful face, I watched him move his finger down the printed lines, shake his head, turn the page, study it closely, and then glance at me There was something strange, something very intense and searching in his drawn face, for a long time he looked at me, and I had never seen him wear such a look before

Unable to restrain my curiosity, I asked him what he was doing

"I thought you were asleep," he said with some embarrassment. Then he came over, book in hand, sat down beside me, and said haltingly, "Look, this is what I wanted to ask you Isn't there some book that gives rules of living? That teaches you how to act? What I'd like to know is what's wrong to do and what's . what's right It makes me sick, the things I do They start out good, but they end up bad Take this business with Capa " He drew a deep breath and then said imploringly, "Please try to find such a book and read it to me "

He paused

"Maxim "

"What?"

"The things Capitolina said to me!"

"What of it? Forget it "

"Of course it don't make any difference now But tell me, had she a right to?"

That was a ticklish question, but after a moment's consideration I said she had

"I think so, too She did have a right to," said Konovalov gloomily, and became silent

He tossed about on the bast mat on the floor, several times he got up, lit a cigarette, sat down at the window, then lay on the floor again

At last I fell asleep, and when I woke up he was gone He came back in the evening It was as though he were covered with a thick layer of dust, and there was a frozen expression in his hazy eyes. Tossing his cap on the shelf, he heaved a sigh and sat down next to me

"Where have you been?"

"To see Capa "

"Well?"

"It's all over, pal Just as I said "

"There's nothing to be done with people like her," I said in an attempt to cheer him, adding a few words about the force of habit and whatever else seemed to fit the situation Konovalov sat staring at the floor and said not a word until I finished

"Oh no, you're wrong That's not the root of the matter It's just that I'm like a disease I wasn't meant to live in this world I give off poison As soon as anybody comes close to me, he gets poisoned There's nothing I can bring anybody but grief When you stop to think of it, who have I ever brought happiness? Not a soul And I've known lots of people in my life There's something rotten about me "

"Nonsense "

"It's the truth," he said with a nod of conviction

I tried to prove he was wrong, but whatever I said only convinced him more firmly that he was not fit to live in this world

A quick and radical change took place in him He became languid, abstracted, taciturn, unsociable, he lost interest in books and no longer worked with his former zeal

In leisure hours he would lie on the floor and gaze steadily up at the vaulted ceiling His cheeks grew sunken and his eyes lost their clear child like lustre

"What's the matter, Sasha?" I asked

"A bout's beginning," he explained "Soon I'll start guzzling vodka My insides smart as if they'd been seared The time's come If it hadn't been for Capa I might have held out longer I can't get her off my mind How can it be here I thought I was doing a person good, and it turns out just the opposite We need rules on how to act, pal Would it really be so hard to make them, those rules, so that all people would act the same and understand each other? How can people be expected to live with such a gulf separating them from one another? Haven't they the brains to know they've got to bring order into life, and see that everybody knows what's what? God!"

He was so absorbed in thoughts about the necessity of bringing order into life that he paid no attention to what I said I noticed that he avoided me One day, on hearing me expound my ideas on the remaking of life for the hundredth time, he flared up

"Shut up I've heard all that before It isn't life that's to blame, but people People are the main thing, understand? And that's all there is to it. According to what you say, people ought to stay just as they are until things are changed Oh no, first change *people*, show them how to act, then everything will be clear and they won't get in each other's way That's what you've got to do for people Teach them to get in the right lane "

When I objected, he lost his temper or became glum

"Oh, leave me alone," he would say

Once he went away in the evening and did not come back to work that night or the next day Instead, the boss came and said anxiously

"Sasha's on a bout. He's sitting in 'The Wall' We'll have to find another baker "

"Maybe he'll come out of it?"

"Not a chance, I know him "

I went to "The Wall", a pub artfully wedged into the stone wall that gave it its name Its distinguishing characteristic was that it boasted not a single window, the light falling through an opening in the roof As a matter of fact it was nothing but a square hole in the ground covered by shingles It smelled of earth, makhorka, and vodka, and was always crowded with suspicious-looking characters For days on end they would lounge there, waiting for one of the workmen to go on a spree so that they could drink the shirt off his back

Konovalov was sitting at a big table in the middle of the pub surrounded by six gentlemen in rags and tatters and with faces that might have belonged to characters from one of Hoffmann's tales. They were listening to him with fawning attention as they drank beer and vodka and ate something that looked like lumps of clay

"Drink, mates, drink as much as you like I've got money and clothes Enough to last us three days We'll drink it all away and to hell! I don't want to work here any more, and I don't want to live here any more either "

"A rotten town," put in someone who looked like John Falstaff

"Work?" queried another, gazing at the ceiling and adding in a tone of wonder, "Is that what a man was born for?"

And they all began to gabble at once, proving to Konovalov that he had a perfect right to drink, and that he was even *obliged* to drink, since it was with them he was drinking

"Ho, Maxim, full of steam," he jingled on catching sight of me "Come, you bookworm, you hypocrite have a swig I've jumped the rails for good, pal To hell! I want to get soaked to the roots of my hair I'll stop when there's nothing left but hair Come on, join in "

He was not yet completely drunk His blue eyes flashed with excitement and the handsome beard covering his chest like a silken fan quivered from the nervous trembling of his lower jaw The collar of his shirt was open, tiny drops of

sweat glistened on his white brow, and the hand with which he held out a glass of beer to me was shaking.

"Drop it, Sasha, let's get out of here," I said, putting a hand on his shoulder.

"Drop it?" he laughed. "If you had said that ten years ago, I might have dropped it. But not now. What else am I to do? I'm aware of everything, every single thing, the least little movement, but I don't understand a thing and I don't know what I ought to do. I'm aware of everything, I tell you, and so I drink, because there's nothing else for me to do. Here, have a drink!"

His companions eyed me with obvious displeasure, all twelve eyes measuring me hostilely from head to foot.

The poor creatures were afraid I would take Konovalov away and deprive them of the treat they had been waiting for.

"This is my pal, mates, a learned fellow, God damn him. Maxim, could you read about Stenka here? What books there are, brothers! Or about Pila. How about it, Maxim? Blood and tears, brothers. That Pila—he was me, wasn't he, Maxim? And so was Sysoika. Honest to God. There's your explanation for you!"

He looked at me with wide-open eyes charged with fear, and his lower jaw trembled queerly. His companions reluctantly made a place for me at the table. I sat down next to Konovalov just as he picked up a glass filled with beer and vodka, half and half.

His one idea seemed to be to deaden himself with this mixture as quickly as possible. When he had swallowed it, he took up a piece of what looked like clay but really was boiled meat, stared at it a moment, then tossed it against the wall of the pub.

His companions let out low growls, like a pack of hungry wolves.

"I'm a lost soul. Why did my mother ever bring me into this world? Nobody knows. Dark. Crowded. Farewell, Maxim, if you don't want to have a drink with me. I'm not going back to the bakery. The boss owes me some money.

Collect it and bring it here I'll drink it Or no, take it and buy yourself books Will you? Don't want to? Suit yourself Or maybe you will? You're a pig if you don't Get away from me Get away, I tell you!"

As he got drunk his eyes took on a hostile glitter

His companions were quite ready to throw me out by the scruff of the neck, so I left before they had a chance

Three hours later I was back in "The Wall" Konovalov's companions had increased by two All of them were drunk he less than the others He was singing, his elbows on the table, his eyes fixed on the sky glimpsed through the hole in the ceiling The drunkards had assumed various poses as they listened to him, and some of them were hiccuping

Konovalov had a baritone voice and took his high notes in a falsetto, as do all workmen when they sing With deep feeling he poured out his mournful roulades, cheek in hand, eyes half closed, Adam's apple protruding His face was pale ith emotion Eight blank inebriate physiognomies were turned to him, and the only sounds that came from them were occasional mutterings or hiccups Konovalov's voice sobbed, moaned, vibrated tenderly It was enough to break one's heart to hear that fine fellow singing so mournfully

The stifling odours, the drunken sweaty faces, the two smoking oil lamps, the dirty soot blackened walls, the earthen floor, the gloomy shadows all of this was unwhole some and depressing It was as if a gruesome feast were being held by men buried alive in some catacomb, and as if one of them were singing for the last time before he died, saying farewell to the sky My friend's song was filled with hopeless sorrow, calm despair, and disconsolate longing

"Maxim here? Want to be my lieutenant?" he inter rupted his singing to say, holding out his hand to me "I've got everything ready, pal Collected a band here are my men and we'll find some more Oh, yes we will That won't be hard And we'll invite Pila and Sysoika, feed them with

meat and porridge every day, won't we? Is it a go? Bring some books with you You'll read to us about Stenka and others Oh, pal, I'm sick of it all! Sick of it all!"

He brought his fist down on the table The bottles and glasses clattered and his companions, instantly sitting up, filled the pub with a dreadful clamour

"Drink, fellows!" shouted Konovalov "Drink away your troubles! Swill it down!"

I went out and lingered in the entrance listening to Konovalov's drunken raving, and when he began to sing again I went back to the bakery, pursued by the sounds of the drunken song, which groaned and sobbed for long in the silence of the night

Two days later Konovalov disappeared

One has to be born into cultivated society to be able to live in it all one's life without longing to escape from the oppressive conventions and small insidious lies sanctioned by custom from the conceit, sectarianism, hypocrisy of that society, in a word, from a vanity of vanities that dulls the senses and corrupts the mind I was born and reared outside of it, and thanks to this favourable circumstance I am unable to take big doses of civilisation without feeling the necessity of breaking out of its bounds from time to time and finding relief from its over-complexity and unwholesome refine ment

Village life is almost as sad and insufferable as life among the intelligentsia The best thing to do at such times is to go among the city slums, where, in spite of the dirt, life is very simple and sincere Or to strike out down the roads and across the fields of your native land an adventure that is greatly refreshing and demands no resources but a pair of sturdy legs

Five years ago I set out on such an adventure, and my wanderings over holy Russia brought me at last to Feodosia At that time the construction of the breakwater had just begun, and I turned my steps in that direction in the hope of earning a little money

I wished first to contemplate the building site as one might a picture, and so I climbed a hill and gazed down on the mighty sea stretching as far as the eye reached, and on the minute creatures that were trying to harness it.

It was a vast picture of human labour that I beheld. The whole rocky shore was dug up, pitted, covered with piles of stone and brush, with barrows, logs, iron bars, pile-drivers, mechanical appliances, and in and out of all this scurried the workmen. One of the hills had been blown up with dynamite, and now the men were chopping it up with picks to clear the way for a railway line. Cement was being mixed in huge containers and moulded into six-foot blocks that were lowered into the sea to form a bulwark against the titanic force of the tide. The people looked as small as maggots against the background of the brown hill mauled by them, and like maggots they wriggled in the scorching heat of this southern sun, among the heaps of crushed rock and piles of timber seen dimly through clouds of stonedust. The chaos about them and the white-hot sky above them suggested that they were digging themselves into the hill, seeking shelter in its bowels from the heat of the sun and the desolation all around.

The oppressive air was filled with the hum and throb of work: the ring of picks against stone, the squeaking of barrow-wheels, the dull thud of falling pile-drivers, the wail of the workers' song "Dubinushka", the chip-chop of the axes barking the logs, and the many-toned cries of the drab human forms animating the scene.

In one place workmen were grunting loudly as they tried to push away a great piece of rock; in another they were lifting an enormous log, shouting in unison:

"One, two—heave!"

"The gashed hillside gave back a blurred echo of their cries.

Along the broken segments of a board walk moved a slow procession of men bent double over barrows loaded with stones, while from the opposite direction came a procession with empty barrows, moving even more slowly,

that they might stretch one moment's rest out to two A motley crowd stood about the pile-driver, and from their midst came a tenor voice singing

Ekh, mates, it's hellish hot,
Ekh, mates, it's a hellish lot!
O i i i, du u-binushka,
One, two, and heave!

A low roar came from the men pulling on the rope, the metal cylinder slid quickly to the top of the shaft, then fell with a dull thud, sending a shudder through the pile-driver

Little grey people were swarming all over the ground between the hill and the sea, filling the air with dust, cries, and the sourish smell of sweat Among them moved their bosses in white duck coats with brass buttons that flashed in the sunlight like cold yellow eyes

The sea stretched calmly to the misty horizon and its transparent waves broke quietly on the seething shore As it sparkled in the sunlight it seemed to be smiling the condescending smile of a Gulliver who knows that with a single movement he can destroy the fruits of the labour of these Lilliputians if he so desires

There it lay, glittering blindingly vast and strong and kindly, sending forth a cooling breath to refresh the exhausted people labouring to curb the freedom of its waves, which were now lapping the mutilated shore so meekly It seemed to feel sorry for these people In the course of the centuries it had learned that those who labour are not the ones who harbour evil designs against it, they are mere slaves, assigned the role of battling with the elements, and in this battle the elements are sure to wreak vengeance upon them They do nothing but labour, they are forever building something, their sweat and blood is the cement of all structures on our earth, yet they themselves get nothing for this, even though all their strength is poured into the eternal aspiration to build, an aspiration which has wrought miracles on earth, but has not given men roofs over their heads or enough food for their bodies These men

themselves are one of the elements, and that is why the sea looks kindly rather than wrathfully upon their unprofitable labour Those little grey maggots boring into the hillside were as the drops of water which the sea hurls against the cold implacable cliffs in its eternal aspiration to enlarge its bounds It is they which are the first to perish from the impact The sum of these drops is something akin to the sea, is in no way different from it just as powerful, just as given to destruction when touched by the breath of the storm In ancient times the sea had knowledge of the slaves who built the pyramids in the desert, and of the slaves of Xerxes, that ridiculous ruler who gave the sea three hundred lashes as punishment for washing away his toy like bridges Slaves have been the same at all times, they have always been submissive, they have always been ill fed, they have always done great and miraculous tasks, sometimes deifying those who drove them to work, more often cursing them, occasionally rising in revolt against their rulers

Quietly the waves ran up on the shore where all these people were building a stone barrier against their constant movement, and as they ran they sang a tender song about the past, about all they had seen, century after century, on the shores of this land

Among the workmen were lean bronzed figures in red turbans or fezzes, in short blue jackets, and in baggy trousers drawn in tight at the knee These, as I learned later, were Turks from Anatolia [8] Their guttural speech mingled with the slow long-drawn speech of Russians from Vyatka, with the terse, quick phrases of Volga men and the soft inflexions of Ukrainians

There was famine in Russia, and the famine had driven people here from almost all the stricken regions They formed little groups of countrymen, while the cosmopolitan tramps with their independent bearing and peculiarities of dress and speech were easily distinguished from those who still had roots in their native soil, who had not forgotten the land and had only left it for a while, under stress of hunger Tramps were to be found in every group mingling as

easily with men from Vyatka as with Ukrainians, and everywhere making themselves at home But most of them had gathered round the pile-driver, since it was easier to work there than with picks or barrows

When I came up to them the workmen were standing with the rope hanging loose in their hands, waiting for the foreman to free the pulley from some hemp which was "jamming" it. He fussed about in the little wooden tower, calling down from time to time

"Give it a jerk "

And they would jerk the rope half heartedly

"Stop! Jerk it again Stop! Come on now!"

The soloist an unshaven youth with a pockmarked face and soldierly bearing squared his shoulders, glanced off to one side, cleared his throat, and began

The driver pounds her into the ground.

The lines which followed could not have been passed by the most lenient of censors. They had evidently been made up on the spur of the moment by the singer himself and called forth a loud guffaw, to which their author responded by twisting his moustache in the manner of a performer who is used to applause

"Nothing else to do?" shouted down the foreman furiously "Braying like the asses you are!"

"You'll burst a blood vessel, Mitrich!" replied one of the workmen

The voice was familiar and I seemed to have seen that tall broad shouldered frame, that oval face and those blue eyes somewhere before Could it be Konovalov? But Konovalov had not had the scar that cleaved this chap's forehead from his left temple to the bridge of his nose And Konovalov's hair had been lighter and less curly And Konovalov had had a handsome beard, while this young man had a clean-shaven chin and a long moustache with trailing ends such as Ukrainians wear But even so there was something strikingly familiar about him I decided to ask

him where I should go to apply for a job, but I waited until the pile was driven in

"A-a umph! A a a umph!" grunted the workmen as they squatted, pulling hard on the rope, then leaped into the air as if taking wing The pile-driver squeaked and shook, hairy brown arms stretched up to the ropes over the heads of the people, biceps stood out in great knots, yet the forty pood iron hammer kept falling shorter and shorter of maximum height and its blows on the pile grew weaker and weaker Anyone watching the scene might have thought these men were idol worshippers, who, in ecstasy and despair, were lifting their arms and bowing before their silent god The air was filled with hot vapours that rose from their dirty sweaty faces with dishevelled hair plastered to wet foreheads, from their brown necks and shoulders twitching with strain from their bodies that were only half clad in rags of every description And these bodies merged to form a solid mass of muscles that writhed in the humid air throbbing with the heat of the south, saturated with the smell of sweat.

"Time's up!" someone shouted in a hoarse rough voice

The workmen's hands relaxed and the ropes fell limply about the pile-driver The men slumped down on to the ground, wiping the sweat from their faces, taking deep breaths of air, easing their backs, feeling their shoulders and filling the air with a low mutter like the growl of an angry beast.

"Friend," said I to the man in question

He turned to me slowly, let his eyes slide over my face, then narrowed them and gazed at me fixedly

"Konovalov!"

"Wait." He tipped back my head as if about to lay hands on my throat, then suddenly a joyful smile lighted his face

"Maxim! Think of that now! Old pal! So you've cut the traces, too, have you? Joined us tramps? Good for you When did you do it? Where have you come from? You and I'll roam all over the earth together That was no life for us, that other life Nothing but misery and a lot of trouble A

sure way to rot to death I've been on the road ever since I left you The places I've seen! The air I've breathed! But look at you, the way you've got yourself up I'd never have known you Clothes of a soldier, face of a student Well, how do you like living like this, from place to place? Don't think I've forgotten about Stenka or Taras or Pila I remember them all "

He punched me in the ribs and clapped me on the shoulder Unable to get a word in edgewise, I just stood and smiled and looked into his kindly face, now radiant with the joy of this reunion I, too, was glad to see him, extremely glad I was reminded of how I had made my start in life, and the start was unquestionably better than what followed

In the end I managed to ask my old friend how he had come by the scar on his forehead and the light curls on his head

"Oh, those? This is how Two of my pals and I thought we'd cross the Rumanian border wanted to see what things were like in Rumania. We set out from Kagul a place in Bessarabia at the very border We're making our way at night, of course very quietly, and all of a sudden 'Halt!' The customs guards We'd run straight into them We took to our heels, and one of those soldier boys caught me on the head Not much of a tap, it wasn't, but it kept me in hospital for a month And just think, the soldier turned out to be from my own town! One of our boys from Murom! He was put in hospital, too, soon after that a smuggler knifed him in the belly When we were feeling better we put two and two together 'Am I the one smashed your cap for you?' that soldier asks me 'Must've been you, once you admit it,' I says. 'You're right, must've been me,' he says, 'but don't hold it against me That's my job We thought you were hauling contraband See, I got it, too they slit my belly open for me Can't be helped Life's nothing to sneeze at ' He and I became great friends a fine fellow he was, Yashka Mazin As for the curls the curls came from typhoid I had typhoid They put me in jail in Kishinev for trying to slip across the border, and there I caught a fine case of typhoid

It kept me on my back so long I thought I'd never get up And I probably never would have if one of the nurses hadn't taken such good care of me It's a miracle how I ever pulled through She watched over me as if I was a baby I don't know why I meant nothing to her 'Drop it, Maria Petrovna,' I'd say 'I'm ashamed to have you making such a fuss over me ' But she'd just laugh at me She had a kind heart Sometimes she'd read me something for the salvation of my soul 'Couldn't you find something something different to read?' I asked her once So she brought a book about an English sailor who got shipwrecked on a desert island and set up housekeeping there [9] There's an interesting book for you! I was mad on that book, wanted like hell to join him on that island What a life! The island, the sea, the sky, and you all by yourself, with everything you need, free as a bird! He found a savage to live with him I'd have drowned the savage, what the hell would I need him for? I'd have got on fine all by myself Did you ever read that book?"

"But tell me how you got out of jail "

"They let me out Held a trial, found me not guilty and let me out Very simple But look, I'm not going to work any more today, what the hell! I've got enough blisters on my hands And I've got three rubles, and I'll get another forty kopecks for this morning Not bad, eh? So you come and spend the day with us we don't live in the barracks but on a hill not far from here Found a hole very suitable to live in Another fellow and I share it, but he's sick got the fever Wait here while I run to the foreman, it won't take me a minute "

He got up quickly and walked away just as the workmen picked up the ropes of the pile-driver to start work again I went on sitting there watching the noisy movement all about me and the calm blue-green sea

The tall form of Konovalov darted in and out among the people, the barrows, the piles of stone and logs. On he went, swinging his arms, clad in a blue cotton shirt that was too short and tight for him, in coarse linen trousers and heavy boots. Now and again he would look back and sign to me

with his hands I found him different, very strong and lively and filled with calm confidence in himself Work was in full swing all about him logs were being split and stones crushed, the barrows creaked drearily, clouds of dust rose into the air, something crashed to earth, people grunted, shouted, swore, and sang in moaning tones

The handsome form of my friend retreating with such a firm step stood out in sharp contrast to this turmoil of sound and movement and suggested an answer to the enigma of Konovalov

Two hours later he and I were lying in the "hole very suitable to live in" And very suitable it was At some former time rock had been hewn from the hillside, leaving a large square cave in which four people could live comfortably But it was very low, and a big boulder hung down over the entrance, so that the only way to get in was to crawl in on one's stomach It was seven feet deep, but there was no need to go inside, and indeed it would have been dangerous to do so, for the boulder might have crashed down and buried us alive For fear of this we disposed ourselves in the following way we thrust our legs and bodies into the hole, which was very cool, and kept our heads outside, so that if the boulder should fall it would merely crush our skulls

The ailing tramp had crawled out into the sun and was lying close enough for us to hear his teeth chatter whenever he was seized by a chill He was a long lanky Ukrainian from Poltava, as he told me dreamily

He rolled on the ground in his efforts to wrap himself up in a grey garment made mostly of holes, he swore very picturesquely when his efforts proved in vain, but did not abandon either his efforts or his swearing He had little black eyes that were always narrowed as if he were constantly scrutinising something

The sun beat down mercilessly on the backs of our heads Konovalov took my army coat and made a sort of tent by stretching it over some sticks that he stuck in the ground

From the distance came the sound of the work going on in the bay, but we could not see it On the shore to our right

stood lumpish white houses constituting the town, to our left and in front of us was the sea receding far, far into the distance where wondrously delicate colours, soothing the eye and the spirit by the elusive beauty of their shades, merged in the soft half tones of a fantastic mirage

As Konovalov watched the sea, a blissful smile spread over his face, and he said to me

"When the sun goes down we'll make a fire and have tea, we've got bread and meat Want some watermelon?"

He rolled a watermelon out of the hole with his foot, took a knife out of his pocket and said, as he cut up the melon

"Every time I find myself by the sea I wonder why so few people settle here They'd be the better for it because the sea's so so gentle It makes you think good thoughts Well, tell me what you've been doing the last few years "

I began to tell him In the distance the sea had already become tinged with crimson and gold, and pink and mauve clouds rose to meet the sun It was as if mountains with snow-capped peaks flushed by the rays of the setting sun were emerging out of the sea

"Too bad you've been living in towns, Maxim," said Konovalov very definitely when I had given my account "What draws you to them? A stuffy life No air, no space nothing a man needs People? There are people everywhere Books? Enough of reading books! Is that what you were born for? Books are the bunk Buy yourself one if you must, put it in your sack, and set out Want to go to Tashkent with me? Or to Samarkand, or some other place? We'll stay there a while and then head for the Amur I've decided to go everywhere that's the only thing to do Then you'll always see something new And won't waste your time thinking Just walk ahead with the wind in your face blowing all sorts of dirt out of your soul Free and light hearted No one to boss you If you're hungry, call a halt and do a fifty kopeck job, or if there's no job, beg a crust of bread you'll always get it At least you'll see something of the world Some of its beauty Want to join me?"

The sun slipped below the horizon The clouds grew darker, as did the sea, and the air became cool Here and there a star came out, the hum of work ceased in the bay, but from time to time we heard the sound of voices, soft as a sigh And the wind wafted to our ears the melancholy murmur of the waves washing the beach

Quickly the darkness deepened and the form of the Ukrainian, which had been very distinct five minutes earlier, was now only a vague mass

"What about a fire?" he said with a cough

"I'll make it "

Konovalov produced a heap of brushwood and set a match to it Thin tongues of flame began to lick the yellow resinous wood A ribbon of smoke wound up into the night air, which was cool and damp from the sea It grew more and more quiet, as if life were withdrawing from us, its sounds fading in the darkness The clouds dispersed, the stars shone brightly in the dark blue sky, and on the velvety, surface of the sea appeared the lights of fishing boats and the reflection of the stars. The fire in front of us blossomed forth like a huge red and yellow flower When Konovalov had hung the tea kettle over it, he clasped his knees in his hands and gazed contemplatively into the flames The Ukrainian crawled nearer, like a huge lizard

"People build towns and houses, they huddle together in crowds, foul the land, suffocate, get in each other's way A hell of a life! This is the only life the one we're leading "

"H'm m," said the Ukrainian with a shake of his head "If you threw in a sheepskin and a warm house for the winter, then you might say we live like lords " He narrowed one eye on Konovalov and gave a little laugh

"Y-e-s," admitted Konovalov, "winter's a deuce of a time Towns really are needed in the winter, no denying that But even so there's no excuse for having big towns. Why live in herds when it's hard enough for even two or three people to get along together? That's what I mean When you come to think of it, there's really no place fit for a man to live in not the town or the steppe or anywhere else

But it's better not to think about such things can't do anything about it, just put yourself in a bad humour "

I had been under the impression that Konovalov's vagabond life had changed him, that the air of freedom he had been breathing for the last few years had enabled him to shed those barnacles of misery that had clung to his heart, but from the tone in which he said this I realised he was still the man I had known, the man "searching for something to hang on to" His powerful body, unfortunately born with too sensitive a heart in it, was still being destroyed by the corrosion of bewilderment, the poison of pondering life There are many such "contemplative" people in Russia, and they are always more unhappy than anybody else, because the burden of their thoughts is made heavier by the ignorance of their minds I gazed with compassion at my friend and he, as if in confirmation of my conclusion, exclaimed unhappily

"I often think about how we lived together, you and me, Maxim, and about about everything that happened then How many places I've been to since, and how many things I've seen! And yet there's no place on this earth where I fit in I just can't find a place for myself "

"That's what you get for being born with a neck no yoke will fit," said the Ukrainian unfeelingly as he took the boiling kettle off the fire

"Tell me why I can't settle down?" returned Konovalov "Why is it that most people live normal enough, tend to business, have wives and children and all the rest, and are always anxious to do something or other? And I can't I just can't Why can't I?"

"The way you whine!" exclaimed the Ukrainian in surprise "As if whining ever made things easier!"

"You're right," said Konovalov cheerlessly

"I'm sparing of words, but I always know what to say," said the Stoic with a sense of his own superiority as he went on fighting the fever

He coughed, shifted his position, and spat furiously into the fire Everything around us was blotted out, hidden by

thick curtains of darkness The sky, too, was dark, for the moon had not yet risen We sensed the sea rather than saw it, so intense was the darkness It was as if a black fog had settled down over the earth The fire went out

"Let's turn in," suggested the Ukrainian

We crawled into the "hole", keeping our heads outside We did not speak Konovalov lay without stirring, as if he had turned to stone The Ukrainian tossed from side to side and his teeth chattered For a long time I kept my eyes fixed on the glow of the dying fire, at first the coals were large and bright, then they grew smaller and became coated with ash, which finally extinguished them Soon there was nothing left of the fire but its warm breath I watched it and thought

"Each of us is like that But oh! to burn brightly for the moment!"

Three days later I took my leave of Konovalov I went on to the Kuban he did not wish to join me We parted certain we would meet again

We never did

1896

The Orlovs

Almost every Saturday evening before vespers, in a crowded little courtyard cluttered with rubbish and hedged in by wooden outhouses sagging with age, could be heard a woman's frantic cries coming from two basement windows in a filthy old house belonging to merchant Petunnikov

"Stop! Stop, you drunken devil!" the woman would shout in a contralto voice

"Let me out!" would come the reply in a man's tenor

"I won't, you beast!"

"You won't, won't you? We'll see!"

"Not if you kill me!"

"You won't, won't you, you heathen!"

"God, he's killing me! Oh, God!"

"I say you will!"

At the first cry Senka Chizhik, house painter Suchkov's apprentice who spent all his days mixing paints in one of the sheds in the courtyard, would dash out with shining eyes, black as a mouse's, and shout at the top of his voice

"The Orlovs are having a fight! Whoop-ee!"

Always ready for a thrill, Senka would rush over to the Orlovs' windows and throw himself face down on the ground, his tousled head hanging over the edge of the area, his eyes popping out of a rouguish face streaked with red and yellow paint as he stared into the dark hole which exuded a smell of mould, cobbler's wax, and fusty leather

At the bottom of this hole two people were struggling, grunting and cursing with the effort

"You'll kill me," gasped the woman

"Never fear," her husband consoled her with concen trated venom

Heavy, dull blows against something soft could be heard, then squeals, groans, and the strained breathing of someone lifting a great weight

"Ooh, what a smack he give her with that last!" said Senka, demonstrating what was going on in the cellar to the little group that gathered round him and which usually consisted of a couple of tailors, the court house courier named Levchenko, an accordionist named Kislyakov, and a few other lovers of free entertainment They would ply him with questions and tug impatiently at his legs and his paint soaked trousers.

"Well?"

"Now he's straddling her back and banging her nose against the floor," reported Senka, shivering ecstatically from the sensations he was experiencing

The others, too, would bend down to the window, burning to see all the gruesome details with their own eyes And although they had long been familiar with the tactics Grigory Orlov employed in warring with his wife, they could not help marvelling

"Ooh, the fiend, has he broke it?"

"It's all bloody, spurting like a fountain "

"Merciful heavens!" the women would exclaim "The heartless brute!"

The observations of the men were more objective

"He's sure to kill her," they said

"He'll stick a knife into her, mark my word," announced the accordionist prophetically "He'll get sick of his tricks one of these days and put an end to all this at once "

"All over!" whispered Senka as he jumped up and dashed to a new observation post in a far corner, knowing that Orlov would come out any moment now

The people quickly dispersed to escape the eye of the raging cobbler It was dangerous to encounter him, and besides, they had lost all interest, now that the fight was over

Ordinarily there would not be a soul in the courtyard but Senka when Orlov put in an appearance Breathing hard,

his shirt torn, his hair on end, his agitated face scratched and sweaty, he would sweep the yard with bloodshot eyes, lock his hands behind his back, and saunter over to an old sledge lying upside down beside one of the outhouses Sometimes he would whistle defiantly and glance from side to side as if about to challenge all the occupants of Petunnikov's house to a fight. Then he would sit down on the sledge runners, wipe the sweat and blood off his face on his shirt sleeve and relax into a weary attitude, staring dully at the dirty wall of the house, at the gashes where the plaster had crumbled off and at the streaks of multi-coloured paint Suchkov's house painters were in the habit of wiping their brushes on this corner of the house when they came home from work

Orlov was in his late twenties The fine features of his sensitive face were ornamented by a little dark moustache which cast a deep shadow over his full red lips Thick eyebrows nearly met above his large cartilaginous nose From under these eyebrows peered black eyes that were always burning with unrest A muscular, energetic man of middle size, somewhat stooped from his work, he would sit on the sledge for a long time in a sort of daze, staring at the streaked wall and drawing the air deep down into his broad brown chest

The sun went down, but the air in the courtyard remained as oppressive as ever It smelt of paint, of tar and sour cabbage and putrefaction From all the windows on both floors of the house came sounds of singing and quarrelling Now and again a sodden face would be thrust through a window, stare at Orlov a moment, and vanish with a little laugh

When the house painters came home from work, they would shoot sidelong glances at Orlov in passing, wink at each other and fill the yard with their lively Kostroma dialect as they made ready to go, some to the bath house, others to the pub. The tailors a lean, bow legged, half-clad lot would crawl down into the yard from their quarters on the second floor and begin teasing the painters for pronouncing their words as if they were spitting out dried

peas And there would be noise and banter and gay bursts of laughter But Orlov would sit there in silence without looking at anyone And no one approached him or dared to make jokes at his expense, for they all knew he was ferocious at such moments

There he would sit, consumed by a dull fury that bore down upon his chest and constrained his breath His nostrils quivered and his lips were curled back to reveal two rows of big strong yellow teeth Something dark and formless was welling up inside of him, red spots swam before his eyes, black misery and a longing for vodka sucked at his vitals He knew that a drink would bring relief, but it was not dark yet, and in such a ragged and disreputable state he was ashamed to walk down the street where he, Grigory Orlov, was known to everybody

He did not wish to become a target for general laughter, but he could not make himself go home to wash and change his clothes The wife he had beaten was lying there on the floor, and she was in every way repulsive to him just then

She was lying there moaning, knowing that she was in the right, that she was his innocent victim He, too, knew it He knew that she was in the right and he in the wrong, but this only made him hate her all the more, because deep down in his soul seethed a dark fury that was stronger than his knowledge of right and wrong All his feelings were hazy and oppressive, and he could not help succumbing to the oppressiveness of them without being able to comprehend them, but knowing that a pint of vodka was the only thing that could bring him relief

Here came Kislyakov, the accordionist He was wearing a red silk shirt and a velveteen vest and his wide trousers were tucked into the tops of natty boots He carried his accordion in a green cloth bag under one arm, his black moustache was twisted into a line as straight as an arrow, his cap was tipped jauntily over one ear, and his face radiated geniality Orlov loved him for his gaiety, his playing, and his sanguine disposition, and he envied him his carefree existence

Congratulations on winning the fight,
Grigory,
And winning a black eye as well

Orlov was not angered by this raillery, he had heard him say the same thing at least fifty times before and knew the accordionist meant no harm by it, he was just having his little joke

"Fought another Plevna?" asked Kislyakov, lingering for a moment in front of the cobbler "Feeling posh with a head like a squash? Come on, let's go the way of all flesh let's have a little drink, you and me "

"In a little while," said Orlov without looking up

"I'll wait for you there and suffer in silence "

Orlov would not be long in following him And when he was gone, a small plump woman would climb out of the basement, holding on to the walls for support Her head was tightly bound up in a shawl, out of the folds of which peeped one eye and a bit of cheek and forehead She tottered across the courtyard and sat down on the sledge where her husband had been sitting No one was surprised to see Matryona they were used to her appearing when her husband was gone and they knew she would sit there until Grigory, drunk and repentant, came home from the pub She sat in the courtyard because it was stuffy in the cellar, and because she would have to help her drunken husband down the stairs The stairs were steep and dilapidated, once Grigory had fallen down them and sprained his wrist He had been unable to work for two weeks and she had had to pawn their few possessions to buy food

Ever since then Matryona had waited up for him

One of her neighbours would sometimes join her there Usually it would be the retired non-commissioned officer Levchenko, a staid and sensible Ukrainian with a drooping moustache, shaved head, and purple nose

"Been fighting again?" he would ask with a yawn as he sat down beside her

"What's it to you?" Matryona would snap back

"Nothing whatever," the Ukrainian would reply, and there would be a long pause

Something deep down in the woman's chest made a rasping sound when she breathed

"What are you two always fighting about? What is it stands between you?" Levchenko would say

"That's our business."

"Don't doubt it," Levchenko would agree, nodding

"Then what are you butting in for?"

"What a woman! There's no saying a word to her! You and Grigory are a match, I will say that. What you need is a good spanking twice a day once in the morning, once in the evening That would take the starch out of you!"

And he would get up in a huff and go away, which was just what she wanted For some time rumours had been circulating in the courtyard that the Ukrainian had not made overtures to her in vain This incensed her against him and against anyone else who did not mind his own business The Ukrainian would march off to the other side of the yard with a smart military step, notwithstanding his forty years

Suddenly Senka would appear out of nowhere

"She's a mouthful of red pepper, that Orlov woman," he would whisper in Levchenko's ear, nodding to where Matryona was sitting

"I'll teach you what red pepper is!" threatened Levchen ko, but he smiled to himself He was fond of the nimble Senka and listened eagerly to whatever he had to say, for Senka knew all the secrets of the courtyard

"There's no fooling with her," went on Senka, ignoring the threat "The painter Maxim tried it, and did she mess up his mug for him! I saw it myself She pounded it like a drum!"

Lively and impressionable, half child and half man though only twelve years old, Senka absorbed the filth that surrounded him with the ease of a sponge absorbing water One fine line already extended the length of his forehead, showing that Senka was given to pondering things

Now it was dark in the courtyard Above it gleamed a little square of dark blue sky all aglitter with stars Seen from above, the yard was like a deep pit lined by tall buildings, and in one corner of this pit sat a little woman recovering from the beating she had been given and waiting for her drunken husband to come home

The Orlovs had been married for almost four years A child had been born to them, but it died when only eighteen months old Both of them grieved over the loss, but soon took comfort in the hope of having another

The basement room they lived in was long and dark, and it had a vaulted ceiling Beside the door, facing the windows, was a big Russian stove A narrow passage between the stove and the wall led into a square opening lighted by two windows overlooking the courtyard The light fell into the cellar in oblique and murky shafts, the room was damp and musty and seemed to be cut off from everything else Life went on up above, but the only signs of it here were the dull nondescript sounds that fell, along with the dust, in colourless flakes down into this hole occupied by the Orlovs. By the wall next to the stove stood a big wooden bed hung with cotton curtains pink flowers in a yellow field The cobbler and his wife had breakfast and dinner at a table opposite the bed, and they worked in the space between the bed and the far wall where the two shafts of light fell

Cockroaches crawled lackadaisically up and down the walls, feasting on the kneaded crumbs of black bread with which pictures cut out of magazines were pasted to the plaster Languid flies filled the air with a monotonous drone and the fly spotted pictures formed dark splashes against the dirty grey background of the walls

The Orlovs' day began as follows at six in the morning Matryona woke up, washed herself and heated a battle scarred samovar covered with pewter patches, while waiting for the samovar to boil she would tidy up the room and go to the shop, then wake up her husband, by the time he got up and washed himself the samovar would be humming away

on the table, and they would sit down to a breakfast of tea and white bread one pound for the two of them

Grigory was a good cobbler and always had plenty of work At breakfast he would enumerate the tasks of the day He himself did whatever required the skill of a master, leaving to Matryona secondary tasks such as waxing thread, pasting in inner soles and nailing on new heel taps At breakfast they also discussed what they would have for dinner In the winter, when they ate a little more because of the cold, this was an interesting topic for discussion, in summer they economised by only lighting the stove on Sundays, and not even every Sunday, and so the main article of their diet was cold soup made of *kvass*, to which they added onions, salt fish, and sometimes meat cooked on one of the neighbour's stoves Breakfast over, they sat down to work Grigory on an overturned pickle tub with a split side and some padded leather on top, his wife on a low stool beside him

At first they worked in silence what was there to talk about? They might exchange a few words about their work, but again they would relapse into a silence lasting for half an hour or more Tap-tap went the hammer, swish swish went the thread as it was drawn through the leather Occasionally Grigory would give a yawn that invariably ended up in a roar or a groan Matryona would sigh Grigory might sing His voice had a metallic edge to it, but he sang well Now the words of the song flocked together in a quick and plaintive recitative that came in rushing out of Grigory's throat as if afraid something might remain unsaid, now they strung themselves out in mournful measures accented by ejacula tions of "Ekh!" and floated, loud and doleful, through the window into the courtyard Matryona would add her mellow contralto to her husband's tenor The faces of both of them would become sad and pensive, and Grigory's dark eyes would grow dim The music seemed to stupefy Matryona, who rocked back and forth in a sort of trance, ecstatically breaking off in the middle of a note, then joining in again Neither of them was conscious of the other as they sang, as

they tried to pour into another's words all the dullness and emptiness of their own benighted lives, as they sought to express in those words the half formed thoughts and feelings born in their own souls

At times Grigory would improvise

Ah, this l i i fe of mine! Ekh, this thrice
cursed life of mine
Ah, the m i isery! Ekh, the accursed misery!
The m i isery accursed!

Matryona disapproved of these improvisations

"Stop howling You sound like a dog before somebody dies "

This always made him indignant

"Bah, you scarecrow! As if you could understand anything, you blubbering snout face!"

"Stopped howling and started barking "

"Shut your mouth and mind your own business Who am I? Your 'prentice, that you should start telling me what to do?"

And Matryona, seeing that the veins in his neck were swelling and an ugly light had come into his eyes, would indeed shut her mouth and keep it shut for a long time, intentionally ignoring the questions of her husband, whose anger always died down as quickly as it flared up

She avoided his eyes that were seeking reconciliation and waiting for her smile, and she was filled with a tremulous fear that this toying with his feelings would rouse him to fury But at the same time she found satisfaction in being angry with him and seeing his efforts to make peace At least she was living, feeling, thinking!

Both of them were young and healthy, and they loved each other and were proud of each other Grigory was so strong, so ardent, so handsome, and Matryona was fair and plump, with a sparkle in her grey eyes a buxom wench, as the people in the courtyard said They loved each other, but they were bored by life, they had no other interests and no new impressions to bring them relief from each other and

satisfy the normal human longing to think and feel—in a word, to live. What they needed was some purpose in life, even though it were nothing but the hoarding of money, coin by coin.

But they did not have this.

Always together, they became used to each other and to each other's every word and gesture. Day after day went by without bringing them any diversion. On holidays they would sometimes visit friends who were as impoverished spiritually as they themselves, and sometimes friends would visit them to sing and drink and, as likely as not, to fight. And then again the uneventful days would drag by like the links of an invisible chain, each with its burden of work and boredom and senseless irritation with each other.

At times Grigory would say:

"Life, the bitch! What do I want with it? Work and mope. Mope and work." After a brief pause he would lift his eyes to the ceiling and go on, the shadow of a smile playing over his lips: "By the will of God my mother brought me into this world—can't say anything against that. Then I learned my trade, but what was *that* for? Aren't there enough cobblers in the world? Very well, I'm a cobbler. What good does it do me? Just sit here in this hole and peg away. And then I'll die. They say the cholera's raging. Let it. Once there was a cobbler named Grigory Orlov and he died of the cholera. Does that make sense? Who cares whether I lived and made boots and died or not?"

Matryona made no comment, sensing something awesome in her husband's words. Sometimes she would ask him not to say such things for they were against God, who knew only too well what to do with people's lives. Or again, when she was out of sorts, she would declare sarcastically:

"If you'd stop drinking you'd find more joy in life and such thoughts wouldn't come into your head. Instead of complaining, other people save up money to buy their own workshops and live as good as gentlefolk."

"Your words sound tinny and prove you're a ninny. Shake your brains and ask yourself how I can give up

drinking when it's the only joy I've got in life Other people! A lot you know about other people! Was I like this before I got married? If the truth's to be told, it's you that sucks me dry and takes all the joy out of life Ugh, you toad!"

Matryona was offended, but she could not deny the truth of her husband's words he *was* gay and affectionate when he was drunk, those "other people" really were just the product of her imagination, and Grigory had indeed been a merry fellow, very kind hearted and amusing, before they were married

"I wonder why Can it really be that I'm a burden to him?" she asked herself

She winced at the thought and felt sorry for them both Going over to him, she looked lovingly into his eyes and nestled against his breast.

"Now she'll start licking me with her tongue, the cow," said Grigory glumly and made as if to push her away, but she only pressed closer, sure he would not repulse her

At that, fires were kindled in his eyes, he threw down his work and took his wife on his knee, kissing her over and over again, drawing in deep breaths and murmuring to her softly, as if afraid someone might hear

"Ekh, Matryona, it's a vile life we live, you and me We snap at each other like wild beasts. And why? Because that's my fate every man is born under a star, and that star's his fate "

But this explanation did not satisfy him and he drew his wife closer and fell to thinking

For a long time they would sit thus, in the foul air of their dingy basement. She would sigh and say nothing, but sometimes, in such blissful moments, she would remember the undeserved insults and injuries received at his hands, and then she would weep softly and complain Touched by her gentle reproaches, he would caress her more fervently and she would grow more tearful In the end this would annoy him

"Stop your slobbering! Maybe it hurts me a thousand times worse than it does you when I beat you, d'you hear? So

shut your mouth Give a woman an inch and she'll take a mile Drop this talk What's there to say to a man who's sick to death of living?"

At other times he would soften under the flow of her quiet tears and impassioned reproaches, and then he would make a dismal, laboured effort to explain things

"What's to be done with a man like me? I'm always hurting you, I know that But I also know you're the only one I've got True, sometimes I forget it Sometimes I just can't bear to set eyes on you, Matryona think of that! As if I'd ate too much of you And then such a madness creeps into my heart that I'd like to tear you to pieces, and myself as well And the more right you are, the harder I want to hit you "

She may not have understood him, but she was comforted by his gentle and contrite tone

"God willing, we'll get over it we'll get used to each other," she would say, not realising that they had long since got used to each other and worn each other out.

"If only a child was born to us, things would be different," she would sigh "We'd have something to amuse us and to take care of "

"Well, then, why don't you have a child?"

"I can't carry it not the way you beat me You always go hard at me in the belly and the side If only you wouldn't use your feet "

"H'm," murmured Grigory, taken aback "As if a man could think where and how to hit at such moments I'm not a fiend I don't do it just for fun. It's the misery drives me to it."

"Where does it come from that misery of yours?" asked Matryona unhappily

"It's my fate, Matryona," philosophised Grigory "My fate and my nature Look at me am I worse than another? That Ukrainian, for instance? Yet the misery never gets him. And he's all alone no wife or anybody I'd die if I didn't have you But he don't seem to mind Just sits there smoking his pipe and smiling, content he has a pipe to smoke, the old

devil But I'm not like that, I was born with this restlessness in my heart It's my nature I'm like a steel spring one touch and it starts quivering Take this, for instance I go out for a walk and see this, that, and the other, and here am I without a thing to my name And it makes me mad The Ukrainian he don't mind, he can do without anything He makes me mad too, damn his whiskers, because he can do without anything, but as for me there's not a thing I don't want! But I just go on sitting here in this hole, pegging away without a thing to call my own Or take you you're my wife, but what of it? You're just a woman like any other, with a full set of a woman's wares And I know all there is to know about you, even how you'll sneeze tomorrow, because I've heard you sneeze at least a thousand times So what's there to get excited about? Not a damn thing And so I go off to the pub because at least it's cheery there "

"What made you get married?" asked Matryona

Grigory gave a little laugh

"The devil only knows," he said "To tell you the truth, I never ought to have I ought to have been a tramp Maybe I'd have gone hungry, but at least I'd have been free to go wherever I pleased I could have wandered to the ends of the earth "

"You can go now, and let me go free, too," said Matryona, who was on the verge of tears

"You? Where do you want to go?" asked Grigory grimly.

"That's my business "

"Tell me where!" and his eyes flashed menacingly

"Don't shout. You can't scare me "

"So you've set your eyes on somebody else, have you? Out with it!"

"Let me go!"

"Go where?" roared Grigory

He snatched her by the hair, knocking off her kerchief His violence roused her fury, and her fury brought enormous satisfaction, stirring her to the depths of her soul, so that, instead of saying the word that would dispel his fears, she fanned the flames, looking him straight in the eye

and smiling significantly He lost control and beat her beat her mercilessly

And at night, as she lay moaning beside him in bed, terribly bruised and broken, *he glanced* at her out of the corner of his eye and sighed profoundly He felt wretched His conscience troubled him, for he knew he had no cause for jealousy and had beaten her for no reason at all

"Come, come, that's *enough*," he said uneasily "I suppose I'm to blame But you're a fine one, too Why didn't you say something instead of egging me on? Why did you have to do that?"

She did not answer She knew why She knew that now, bruised and bleeding as she was, she would have his caresses the tender, passionate caresses of reconciliation And for this she was willing to suffer the pain of a broken body every day of *her life* And she wept from the very anticipation of delight, before her husband had so much as touched her

"Come, come, Matryona, come my little dove, don't cry, forgive me, lovey," and *he* stroked her hair and kissed her and clenched *his* teeth against a bitterness that filled *his* whole being

Their windows were open, but a view of the sky was cut off by a brick wall, as always, their room was dark and stuffy and oppressive

"Ekh, what a life! A dog's life!" whispered *Grigory*, unable to express all the pain he felt "It's because of this hole we live in, Matryona. As if we was buried in the earth before our time "

"Let's move to a new place," said Matryona through her tears, taking his words literally

"It's *not* that Even if we moved into an attic we'd still be living in a hole, because it's *not* this cellar that's the hole it's life itself "

Matryona considered a moment.

"God willing, things will get better with us," she repeated

"Things will get better you're always saying that But they seem to be getting worse instead of better We fight more and more often "

And that was true The intervals between their quarrels had been growing shorter, until now Grigory woke up every Saturday morning with a feeling of enmity towards his wife ripe within him

"Tonight I'm going to Baldy's pub to get soaked to the gills," he would announce

Matryona would narrow her eyes and say not a word

"Nothing to say? That's right You'll keep your mouth shut if you know what's good for you "

In the course of the day he reminded her of his intention several times, his venom increasing with the approach of evening, he sensed that it hurt her to hear him, and he was infuriated by the obstinate silence that greeted his an nouncements, and by the cold gleam in her eye that said she was ready to resist him

And true enough, in the evening Senka Chizhik, herald of their misfortune, would announce the fight

When he had beaten his wife, Grigory would vanish, often for the night, sometimes for the whole of Sunday as well On his return Matryona, all covered with bruises, would greet him coldly, silently, but filled with secret pity for this man who came back to her, ragged and dirty, with bloodshot eyes, as badly beaten, perhaps, as she herself

Knowing he would have a hangover, she would have ready a pint bottle to make it easier He knew this.

"Give me something," he would say, hoarsely, and when he had gulped down two or three glassfuls, would sit down to work

All day long he would suffer pangs of conscience, often they were so insufferable that he would toss aside his work and break out into fearful oaths, rushing about the room or throwing himself down on the bed Matryona would give him time to get over it, and then they would make their peace

In the early days of their marriage these moments of reconciliation held much that was sweet and poignant, but gradually they grew more matter-of fact, and at last the couple made their peace merely because it was inconvenient not to speak to each other for the five days that separated them from the next Saturday

"You'll drink yourself to death," sighed Matryona.

"I will," confirmed Grigory, and spat into the corner with the air of a man to whom it makes not the slightest difference whether he drinks himself to death or not "And you'll leave me," was the detail he added to the picture of the future, giving her a probing look as he said it

She dropped her eyes, a thing she would not have done earlier, and Grigory, seeing this, drew his brows together and set his teeth Without telling her husband, she would go to fortune tellers and sorceresses, bringing home with her charmed roots or bits of coal When this proved ineffective, she had a prayer said to the great martyr Saint Boniface, who interceded on behalf of drunkards, and all the while the prayer was being read she knelt and wept profusely, silently working her quivering lips

More and more often she was possessed by a cold and furious hatred for her husband which gave birth to morbid thoughts, and gradually her heart hardened against this man whose gay laughter and tender words had filled her life with brightness three years before

In this way these two people, neither of them bad at heart, went on living day by day, waiting for something to happen that would end the torment of their preposterous way of life

One Monday morning when the Orlovs were having breakfast, the imposing figure of a policeman appeared in the doorway of their dismal dwelling Orlov jumped up and made a heroic effort to revive the events of the past few days in his sodden memory as he fixed his dull eyes, shadowed by the most dreary expectations, on the visitor

"This way, this way," called the policeman to somebody outside

"It's dark as a dungeon here, devil take that merchant Petunnikov!" came a young and cheerful voice, and the next moment a student in white university uniform entered the basement He was holding his cap in his hand, his hair was close-cropped, he had a high, sunburnt forehead and brown eyes that flashed jovially behind his glasses.

"Good morning," he said in a deep voice "Allow me to introduce myself the sanitary inspector I've come to see how you're getting on To sniff the air you breathe very bad air indeed "

Orlov smiled and gave a sigh of relief He took to this student at once his face, with the reddish down on cheeks and chin was so pink, wholesome and kindly And he smiled in such an exceptional and genial way that the Orlovs' basement room seemed to grow brighter and more cheerful because of it.

"And now, my good people," he went on without stopping, "see that you throw out the garbage more often, because it's the garbage that gives off that bad tasting smell And I'd advise you to wash the pail more often, housewife And why should you be wearing such a long face, my man?" At this he took Orlov's hand and felt his pulse

The student's breezy manner abashed the Orlovs. Matryona smiled confusedly and watched him without speaking Grigory's smile was distrustful

"And how are your tummies?" asked the student. "Don't be bashful we all have tummies and if they're giving you any trouble we'll supply you with various bitters that will put an end to it."

"We're all right. Can't complain," replied Grigory with a little laugh "If you find me not quite up to the mark, that's because well, to tell you the truth, I've got a little hangover "

"True enough, my nose was telling me you'd had a wee bit to drink last night just the tiniest drop, of course "

He said this in such a comical way and pulled such an absurd face that Grigory burst out laughing. Matryona laughed, too, covering her mouth with her apron. The student laughed loudest and hardest of all, but he was the first to stop. And when the wrinkles of laughter about his puffy lips and eyes were smoothed out, his candid face seemed more candid than ever.

"It's right that a workingman should have his drink—if he knows when to stop. But times are such at present that it would be better to do without it. Have you heard about the disease that is going the rounds?"

And he told them, very gravely and in simple terms, about the cholera and the means of fighting it. As he spoke he walked about the room, feeling the walls, glancing into the corner where the wash-basin and the slop-bucket stood, stooping down and sniffing at the stove-grate to find out what the smell coming from it could be. In his enthusiasm his bass voice kept breaking into tenor notes; the simple words he used ranged themselves firmly in the memory of his listeners, one after another, of their own accord, without any effort on their part. His eyes shone and his whole being was charged with enthusiasm for the cause he was serving.

A smile of curiosity played over Grigory's face as he watched him. Matryona kept clicking her tongue; the policeman disappeared.

"So start cleaning up this very day. A house is being built down the street and the masons will gladly let you have all the lime you want for five kopecks. And do stop drinking, my man. And now—good-bye for the present. I'll drop in again soon."

He vanished as suddenly as he had come, and the memory of his laughing eyes was registered in the pleased smiles on the faces of the Orlovs. They were confused by this intrusion of purposeful energy into their benighted lives.

"H'm-m," drawled Grigory, shaking his head. "So that's your chemist for you. And they say they poison people. As if a chap with a mug like that would do such a thing! Not on your life! He came here open and above board, much as to

say here I am, just as you see me! Lime did you ever hear of that being harmful? And citric acid what's that? Just plain acid, I guess. But the most important thing is to keep everything clean clean floor, clean air, clean slop-bucket Poison people indeed! A jolly fellow, eh? Says it's right a workingman should have his drink if he knows when to stop—hear that, Matryona? So what about pouring me out a glass? Is there any?"

She gladly poured him out half a glass from a bottle she had got somewhere or other

"He really was nice You couldn't help liking him," she said, smiling as she recalled the student's face "As for the others who knows? Maybe they really are hired "

"Hired for what? And who hires them?" broke in Grigory

"Hired to kill off the people They say there's an awful lot of poor folks and the order's been given to get rid of the extra ones," said Matryona

"Who says so?"

"Everybody The house painter's cook and lots of others "

"And fools they are to say it Who would gain by such a thing? Think for yourself caring for the sick that costs something, don't it? And then burying them a coffin and a grave and all the rest And it all comes out of the treasury Nonsense If they really wanted to get rid of people they'd send them to Siberia plenty of space for everybody out there Or to a desert island And make them work That would be getting rid of them, and very profitable besides And there's nothing like profit for the treasury, so it's not going to go killing people off and burying them at its own expense That student, now he's a trouble maker, any body can see that, but what he is up to is uprisings As for killing people off you couldn't get him to do it for love or money Can't you tell by just looking at him he wouldn't do such a thing? He's not got that kind of mug "

All that day they talked about the student and what he had told them They recalled his face and the way he

laughed, and they discovered that a button had been missing from his coat, and they nearly quarrelled about which side it had been missing from Matryona insisted it was the right side, her husband said it was the left and cursed her roundly twice on this account, but on remembering that she had not emptied the bottle when pouring out his drink, he gave in to her They resolved to set about scouring the room the next day, and then, exhilarated by an experience that had been like a breath of fresh air to them, began talking about the student again

"Ekh, *the son of a gun!*" said Grigory ecstatically "Acted as if he'd known us for years! Pokes his nose in everywhere, gives us a lecture, and *out he goes No shouts, no noise,* even if he is one of your higher ups Damn it all, Matryona, can't you see he really does care? You could tell that from the very start They want to keep our bodies and souls together, and not not that's all nonsense about poison ing people Old wives' tales 'How are your tummies?' he asks If they wanted to poison us, what the hell would they care about how our tummies were? And how slick he explained about those what do you call them? those thingumbobs that crawl around in your insides?"

"Polywogs, or something like that," laughed Matryona "But that was said just to scare us, to make us clean up "

"Who knows? Maybe it was all true After all, dampness does breed worms Damn it all, what did he call those bugs? Polywogs? No, not that the word's on the tip of my tongue but I can't spit it out "

Even after they were in bed they went on talking with the naive excitement of children confiding their first striking impressions And they were still talking when they dropped off to sleep

They were awakened early the next morning by the house painters' fat cook She was standing beside their bed and her face, usually round and red, was drawn and grey

"Time to be up and about," she said hurriedly, flapping her thick lips in an odd way

"The cholera's come to our house A visitation of the Lord," and she burst into tears

"Are you crazy?" cried Grigory

"And I forgot to empty the slop bucket last night," said Matryona guiltily

"As for me, dears, I'm quitting my job, I'll go away Away to the country," said the cook

"Who's got it?" asked Grigory as he jumped out of bed

"The accordionist It caught him in the night Right in the belly convulsions, like from arsenic poisoning "

"The accordionist?" muttered Grigory He could not believe it Such a jolly, jaunty fellow Yesterday he had crossed the courtyard with his usual peacock swagger "I'll go and see him," said Orlov with a dubious laugh

Both of the women cried out in fright.

"Don't, Grigory, it's catching!"

"God Almighty, don't think of it!"

Grigory swore, thrust his feet into his shoes, and made for the door without combing his hair or buttoning the collar of his shirt His wife caught him by the shoulder He felt the trembling of her hand, and this, for some reason, threw him into a passion

"I'll smash your face for you! Get away!" he roared, pushing her in the chest.

The courtyard was quiet and empty As he made his way to the accordionist's door he was seized by a chill of fear, and at the same time he enjoyed the satisfaction of feeling that he alone, of all the people in their house, had the courage to go and see the sick man This satisfaction was enhanced by the sight of the tailors watching him from their second story window He began to whistle and gave a defiant toss of his head But on reaching the door he met a slight disappoint ment in the person of Senka Chizhik.

Senka had opened the door a crack and stuck his sharp nose through it, as usual, he was so completely absorbed in his observations that he turned round only when Grigory tweaked his ear

"It's twisted him all up, Uncle Grigory," he whispered, turning up a smudged face that had grown more pinched than ever under the stress of his latest impressions "He looks like a dried mushroom "

A whiff of foul air came from the room Grigory stood there listening to Senka without replying, trying to get a peep at the sick man through the crack in the door

"Should I give him a drink of water, Uncle Grigory?" asked Senka

Grigory glanced down into the boy's face, it was twitching all over with nervous agitation, and Grigory himself was agitated

"Fetch some water," he ordered, and then boldly threw open the door and stood in the doorway, involuntarily straining backwards

He caught a hazy vision of Kislyakov The accordionist, dressed in his best clothes, was sprawling with his chest on the table, gripping it tightly with both hands while his feet, in patent leather boots, moved aimlessly over the wet floor

"Who is it?" he asked hoarsely and apathetically

Grigory squared his shoulders and went over to him, stepping gingerly over the floor and trying to speak brightly, even jokingly

"It's me, Dmitri Pavlovich What's this, took more than you could hold last night?" He stared hard at Kislyakov, overcome by fear and curiosity, and had difficulty in recognising him

The accordionist's face was drawn, his cheek bones stuck out in two sharp angles, his eyes, sunken and with greenish spots round them, had a curiously dull and fixed stare, the skin on his cheeks was the colour of a corpse on a hot summer day Frightening and death like was his face, and only the faint movement of his jaws proved that he was still alive For a long time he kept that dull stare fixed on Grigory, and this filled the cobbler with horror For some reason he plucked at the seams of his trousers as he stood there, some three paces away from the sick man, and he felt as if someone had seized him by the throat with a cold and

clammy hand and was slowly strangling him He wanted to rush out of that room, once so bright and cosy, now strangely cold and filled with the smell of decay

"Well " he began, preparing his retreat A shadow passed over the accordionist's grey face He opened lips that were edged with black foam and said in a soundless voice

"I'm dying "

These two words, pronounced with inexpressible apathy, struck Grigory in the head and chest like two dull blows He grimaced foolishly and turned to the door, but at that moment Senka rushed in, breathless and all in a sweat, with a pail of water

"Here from the Spiridonov's well they didn't want to give it to me, the sons of bitches "

He put the pail on the floor, dashed into a corner, came back and handed a glass to Grigory, chattering all the while

"'So you folks have caught the cholera?' he says to me 'What if we have?' says I 'We've caught it, and you will, too it's sure to go the rounds now, like that time in the settlement,' I says. Smack! and he gives me a crack on the bean "

Grigory dipped up a glassful of water and drained it in one draught His ears were ringing with those lifeless words

"I'm dying "

But Senka kept bustling about, never so much in his element

"Water," murmured the accordionist, moving towards them along with the table

Senka leaped up and held a glass of water to his discoloured lips As if in a dream Grigory, who was leaning against the wall near the door, heard the sick man sip the water noisily, then he heard Senka suggest that they undress him and put him to bed, and then came the voice of the house painters' cook Her broad face, wearing a look of fear and compassion, was pressed against the window pane and she said in a tearful voice

"Give him some rum with soot in it two spoonfuls of soot to a glassful of rum "

Another person in the courtyard suggested wood-oil mixed with pickle brine and Imperial vodka Suddenly the light of some remembrance pierced the dense and oppressive gloom that had settled down on Grigory He rubbed his forehead vigorously, as if to intensify the light, then he turned abruptly and ran out of the room, across the courtyard, and down the street

"God Almighty, the cobbler's got it! He's run to the hospital," wailed the cook in explanation of Orlov's sudden departure

Matryona, who was standing next to her, turned pale, opened wide her eyes and began to shake all over

"That's a lie," she murmured hoarsely, scarcely moving her lips "That accursed disease couldn't get Grigory He wouldn't let it "

But the cook, still wailing, ran off, and five minutes later a little crowd of neighbours and passers by had gathered in the street in front of merchant Petunnikov's house The same feelings were expressed on all the faces excitement, alternating with hopeless despair, malice, forced bravado With a flash of bare heels Senka would dash out into the courtyard and back again to keep the crowd informed of the accordionist's state

The people crushed together, filling the smelly air of the street with the hum of their voices, above which could sometimes be heard vicious and meaningless oaths

"Look! Orlov!"

Orlov was riding up to the gate on the shafts of a waggon driven by a glum looking man dressed all in white

"Out of the way!" shouted the driver in a deep voice, turning his horse straight into the crowd

The sight of the waggon and the shouts of the driver cast a damp over the animation of the crowd Everyone instantly quieted down and many of the people hurried away

In the wake of the waggon came the student with whom the Orlovs were acquainted His cap had slipped to the back of his head, sweat was streaming off his brow, and he

was wearing a long robe of blinding whiteness with a large round hole with brown edges burnt into the front of it

"Well, where's the sick man?" he asked in a loud voice, casting sidelong glances at the people gathered in the corner next to the gate Their response was hostile

"Look at the new cook!" someone called out

"Just wait and see what he'll treat you to!" muttered someone else

"He'll give you soup that'll make you puke," said the wiseacre to be found in any crowd

This elicited a cheerless burst of laughter tinged by fear and distrust

"Look, *they're* not afraid How do you explain that?" was the insinuating question put by a man with a strained look on his face and a glance full of resentment

People sobered and their talk became hushed

"They're carrying him out "

"Orlov, the bastard "

"And he's not afraid?"

"Him, the dirty drunk?"

"Easy, easy Orlov Lift his feet higher That's it All right, you can drive off, Pyotr," said the student. "I'll be along soon Well, Orlov, I'll have to ask you to help me clean up this contagion Incidentally you'll learn how to do it it may come in handy Have you any objections?"

"No," said Orlov, feeling very proud as he glanced round

"I can help, too," put in Senka

He had accompanied the dread waggon to the gate and returned just in time to offer his services The student turned his spectacles on him

"And who might you be?"

"One of the house painters Their 'prentice," explained Senka

"Aren't you afraid of the cholera?"

"Me, afraid?" said Senka in amazement "Not me! I'm not afraid of nothing!"

"That so? Good Well, then " and the student sat down on a barrel lying on the ground and rocked back and forth as he explained to Grigory and Senka how important it was to keep themselves clean

Matryona came up with an anxious smile on her face Behind her came the cook, wiping her eyes on her greasy apron In a little while they were joined by a few other people, who approached as stealthily as a cat creeps up on a sparrow In the end there were about ten people pressing about the student, and this inspired him He stood in the centre of them, gesticulating vigorously as he launched on a lecture that one minute brought smiles to the faces of his listeners, the next an expression of rapt attention, undisguised distrust, or jeering scepticism

"The most important means of combating all disease is cleanliness cleanliness of the body and of the air you breathe," he told them

"God Almighty!" groaned the house painters' cook "The only thing that's sure to spare you an untimely death is praying to the holy martyr Saint Barbara "

"Lots of people live clean and breathe clean, and they die anyway," declared one of the listeners

Orlov stood next to his wife watching the student and turning something over in his mind He felt a little tug at his sleeve

"Uncle Grigory," whispered Senka, his eyes glowing like coals "Looks like Kislyakov's going to die and he hasn't got no relatives Who'll get his accordion?"

"Shut up, you little bastard," said Orlov, waving him off

Senka walked away and stood peering through the window of the accordionist's room, searching for something with his eyes

"Lime, tar " enumerated the student in a loud voice

In the evening of that turbulent day Matryona said to her husband as they were having supper

"Where did you go with that student today?"

Grigory looked at her absently without answering

He had gone off with the student after fumigating the accordionist's room, and had come back at three in a thoughtful and taciturn mood Throwing himself on the bed, he had lain there until supper time without uttering a single word, although his wife had tried more than once to make him speak He did not even swear at her, and the strangeness and unnaturalness of this made her uneasy

With the instinct of a woman whose whole life was centred in her husband, she suspected him of having been caught up by some infatuation, and fear of this fanned her curiosity What could be troubling him?

"Maybe you're not feeling well, Grigory?"

He gulped down the last mouthful of tea in his saucer, wiped his moustache on the back of his hand and unhurriedly pushed his empty glass across the table to his wife

"I went to the barracks with the student," he said with a frown

"To the cholera barracks?" exclaimed Matryona, and then, in an awed whisper "Are there many people there?"

"Fifty three, counting our accordionist Some are getting better they're up already Yellow and skinny "

"People who've had the cholera? I don't believe it They probably took in a few others just for appearances to make it look as if they was able to cure them "

"You're a fool," said Grigory curtly, anger flashing in his eyes "All of you here are thick heads Stupid and ignorant, that's what you are It's enough to kill a man, living with such blockheads You just can't get a thing into those heads of yours " He snatched up his refilled glass and grew silent again

"And where did you get to know so much?" asked Matryona caustically, heaving a sigh

He said nothing unapproachably severe and thought ful The cooling samovar sang a wheezy little tune Through the window drifted smells of paint, carbolic acid, and the disturbed garbage pit, the dusk, the smells, and the wheeze of the samovar all merged into one, and the black

stove opening glowered at the man and his wife as if it meant to gobble them up at the first opportunity The couple crunched at their lumps of sugar, rattled their dishes, swallowed their tea Matryona sighed frequently, Grigory drummed on the table with his fingers

"You never saw anything so clean!" he burst out unexpectedly "Every single one of the people who work there is dressed in white The sick ones get baths every minute And wine, at two-and a half a bottle And the food they eat? One whiff's enough to fill your belly As for the way they're looked after a mother's care H'm Where's the sense? A man lives for years and years without anybody caring enough even to spit on him, let alone drop in and ask how he is and how life's treating him But the minute he takes it into his head to die they won't let him Why, they half kill themselves to keep him alive Barracks, and wine at two-and a half a bottle Can't they see there's no sense in it? They put out a hell of a lot of money for wine and barracks, couldn't they spend the same money on making life easier for him when he's well a little bit every year?"

His wife made no effort to understand what he said, it was enough for her that he was saying something new, and the conclusion she correctly drew was whatever was seething in Grigory's soul boded ill for her She wanted to know just how it would affect her, and to know it as soon as possible And this desire was fraught with fear and hope and a certain hostility towards her husband

"They probably know what they're doing better than you do," she said, pursing her lips, when he had finished

Grigory shrugged his shoulders, threw her a sidelong glance, and after a moment's pause went on with even more asperity in his tone

"That's their business, whether they do or they don't But if I'm the one to die without having had a decent taste of life, then I'm the one to say what's what And here's what I say I've had my fill of this sort of life, and I don't intend to sit and wait for the cholera to come and tie me up in knots I can't Pyotr Ivanovich says throw yourself straight at

it you against fate, fate against you, and see who wins An open fight and no mercy shown In other words I'm to go and work at the barracks, and that's that Understand? Put my head in the lion's jaws if it bites it off, I'll just jerk my legs Twenty rubles a month and maybe a bonus besides It may cost me my life? Right, but I'll croak sooner if I stay here "

Grigory brought his fist down so hard on the table that the dishes jumped up

As the beginning of his speech Matryona had listened with an anxious and inquiring look on her face, as he finished she narrowed her eyes disapprovingly

"Was it the student who advised you to do this?" she asked with restraint

"I've got a mind of my own, I can think for myself," said Orlov evasively

"Well, and what did he advise you to do with me?" went on Matryona

"With you?" The question caught him unawares, he had not yet had time to consider his wife He could leave her at home Other men left their wives at home, but it would be dangerous to leave Matryona. You had to keep an eye on her Struck by that realisation, he scowled and said, "You'll go on living here I'll bring you my wages "

"I see," said his wife serenely, and then she gave that meaningful woman's smile that is sure to produce a stab of jealousy in a man's heart

Grigory, who was highly sensitive, instantly felt it But his pride would not let him show his feelings to his wife

"Woof woof! Quack, quack! that's all you can say "

He waited for her reply

But she only smiled that tantalising smile again and said nothing

"Well, how's it to be?" snapped Grigory

"What's that?" asked Matryona, who was calmly wiping the glasses

"You vixen! None of your airs, or I'll let you have it!" fumed Grigory "Maybe it's to my death I'm going "

"It's not me that's sending you Don't go "

"You'd be only too glad to send me I know you," he cried sardonically

Again she said nothing This infuriated him, but he restrained his usual outburst restrained it because of a most cunning idea, or so he considered it, that had just flashed through his mind

"I know you'd be only too glad to see me caught in some shambles, but you just wait!" he gloated "I know a trick or two myself, I'll show you!"

He jumped up, snatched his cap off the window sill and went out, leaving his wife regretting her tactics, resenting his threats, and full of apprehension for the future

"O Lord, O Holy Virgin, Queen of Heaven," she breathed

For a long time she went on sitting at the table trying to guess what Grigory was up to In front of her were washed dishes, the setting sun cast a rosy spot of light on the white wall opposite their window, the wall refracted it into their basement and it was caught on the edge of the glass sugar bowl standing in front of Matryona This meagre brightness caught her attention, and she sat staring at it with wrinkled brow until her eyes ached Then she put away the dishes and went to bed

It was dark when Grigory came back By the sound of his step on the stairs she could tell he was in a good humour He made his way to the bed, cursing the darkness in the room, and sat down beside her

"Guess what," he said with a little laugh

"What?"

"You're going to work there with me "

"Where?" she asked in a trembling voice

"In the same barracks where I'll be," he announced triumphantly

She threw her arms about his neck, squeezed him hard and kissed him on the lips This was so unexpected that he pushed her away

She's making believe, he thought. She don't want to work there at all, the minx. She's just making believe—thinks her husband's a damn fool, the little hussy.

"What're you so happy about?" he demanded suspiciously, feeling a sudden urge to throw her on the floor.

"Nothing special," she answered glibly.

"None of your tricks! I know you!"

"Ruslan, my gallant knight!"

"Drop it! I'll show you!"

"Grigory, my love!"

"Listen, do you mean it?"

When his spirits had been somewhat subdued by her caresses, he turned to her anxiously and said:

"Aren't you scared?"

"What of? We'll be together, won't we?" she answered simply.

It was pleasant to hear her say that.

"That's nice of you," he exclaimed, and pinched her so hard that she let out a squeal.

On the Orlovs' first day at the barracks, a great many new patients were brought in, and the two tiros, used as they were to the slow and even tenor of their lives, felt lost and terrified in the midst of this seething activity. They were confused at their own clumsiness, their difficulty to understand what they were told to do, and at the ghastly impressions they received. They did their best, but only succeeded in getting in other people's way. On several occasions Grigory felt that he deserved being shouted at or given a severe reprimand for his incompetence, but to his great surprise nobody shouted at him.

When one of the doctors—a tall man with a black moustache, an aquiline nose and a big wart over his right eyebrow—told Grigory to help one of the patients into the bath, Grigory seized the sick man under the arms with such a will that he let out a cry and grimaced with pain.

"You mustn't break him to bits, friend; he's to be put in the bath all of a piece," said the doctor gravely.

Grigory was ashamed The patient, a tall lanky fellow, forced a smile and said

"He's new at it, he hasn't learned yet "

As soon as the Orlovs arrived at the barracks an old doctor with a pointed grey beard and large glistening eyes gave them a talk on how to treat the patients, how to hold them when carrying them from one place to another, and what to do in various circumstances In conclusion he asked Grigory and Matryona if they had had baths and gave them each a white apron The doctor had a soft voice and spoke quickly, the Orlovs liked him immensely People in white kept rushing past, orders were given and caught on the fly, patients moaned and groaned, water splashed and flowed, and all these sounds were borne on air so densely saturated with unpleasant odours that every word spoken by a doctor, every groan emitted by a patient, seemed to have its own stinging odour

At first Grigory could perceive nothing but chaos here He was sure he would never be able to fit in that he would suffocate and fall ill But in a few hours he became infected by the energy diffused everywhere, he grew alert, eager to find a means of being useful, for he sensed that he would feel better and calmer if he joined in the bustle

"Bichloride of mercury!" called out a doctor

"Hot water!" ordered a thin student with red and swollen eyelids

"Hey, you what's your name? Orlov? Rub this fellow's legs This way That's right, that's right Easier, you don't want to take the skin off," said another student, long haired and pock marked, as he showed Grigory how to massage

"They've brought another patient," somebody an nounced

"Carry him in, Orlov "

And Grigory dazed, sweating, with bleary eyes and foggy mind did his best At times he was so overwhelmed by his impressions that he lost a sense of his own existence Green spots around glazed eyes in earth-coloured faces, limbs that seemed to have been whittled down by disease,

sticky smelly skin, the horrible convulsions of bodies scarcely alive—all these things caused him pangs in the heart and sickness in the stomach.

Once or twice he caught fleeting glimpses of his wife in the corridor of the barracks. She had grown thinner, her face was grey and wore a distracted look.

"How are things?" he once asked.

She gave him a wan smile and went on without a word.

Grigory was struck by a thought that was unnatural to him: maybe he had been wrong to drag his woman into this accursed place; she might catch something. And so the next time he saw her he called out sternly:

"See that you wash your hands often! Take good care of yourself!"

"And if I don't?" she flung back, baring her small white teeth in a grin.

That made him angry. A fine place to joke in, the little fool! What a low lot they were, women! But Matryona caught the flash of his eye, and before he had time to retort she had disappeared in the women's ward.

A few minutes later he was carrying a policeman of his acquaintance to the morgue. The policeman swayed quietly on the stretcher, his eyes fixed in a glassy stare on the hot bright sky. Grigory gazed at him in dull horror; only three days before he had met him on his beat and had even sworn at him (he had a little score to settle with this particular policeman). And now here he lay, this man who had been so robust and pugnacious—dead, hideous, distorted by convulsions.

Grigory felt that there was something wrong in this: why should a person be born into this world only to be carried off in a single day by such a loathsome disease? He glanced down at the policeman and felt sorry for him.

And then all of a sudden the left hand of the corpse stirred and straightened, and the left side of his twisted mouth that had been hanging half-open, fell shut.

"Stop! Pronin—" gasped Grigory as he put his end of the stretcher down, "—he's alive."

The man at the other end turned round and stared steadily at the dead man for a moment

"What're you lying for?" he said tartly "He just straightened his arm for the coffin, don't you know that? Come along "

"But he moved," insisted Grigory, shaking with terror

"Come along, you queer egg Can't you understand what you're told? He straightened his arm for the coffin, I say, so of course he moved Your ignorance'll get you in trouble one of these days Alive! A fine thing to say about a dead corpse! Want to start trouble? See you don't say a word to nobody about their moving They all do it The news'd spread all over town, the flea'd get turned into an elephant, and then there'd be hell to pay Burying people alive! Folks'd come swarming here and knock the lights out of us Out of you, too Here, dump him off on the left "

The man's unruffled voice and unhurried gait had a passifying influence on Grigory

"Don't lose heart, you'll get used to it. Not a bad place, this Good food, good treatment, and all the rest We'll all be corpses some day, nothing surer And in the meantime, keep a stiff upper lip that's the main thing Do you drink?"

"Yes," said Grigory

"Good I've got a bottle hid in a hole over there what if we go over and take a swig?"

So over they went to the hole behind the barracks and took a swig, and then Pronin poured a few drops of peppermint on a lump of sugar and handed it to Grigory, saying

"Eat this to take the smell away They're very strict about vodka here say it's bad for you "

"Have you got used to this place?" asked Grigory

"Me? I've been here from the very first. All the people I've seen kick the bucket! It's not exactly a restful sort of life, but it's not bad The Lord's work Like in battle Ever heard about war nurses and medics? I saw a lot of them in the Turkish campaign At Ardagan and Kars Those people are

braver than us soldiers We go into battle with guns in our hands, with bullets and with bayonets. But they go walking about in a hail of bullets like they was taking a stroll in the garden They drag us or the Turks off the field to the hospital and all the while the bullets go whizz! bing! bang! Sometimes a medic gets hit in the back of the head ping! and it's all over."

Grigory felt better after this talk and a good stiff drink of vodka

"No dropping the reins once you've picked them up," he said to himself as he rubbed the legs of one of the patients Behind him someone was moaning and calling plaintively

"Water, Oh h h, please, somebody "

"Ouch! Hotter! It helps, d-d-doctor Honest to G g god Do let them add some more b-b-boiling water!"

"Give him some wine," called out Doctor Vaschenko

As Grigory swung into the work he saw that things were not really as horrible and repulsive as they had seemed at first, and what he had taken for chaos was the proper functioning of a great and intelligent force Yet he shuddered and glanced furtively out of the window into the courtyard every time he remembered the policeman He believed him to be dead, but his belief was vacillating What if the policeman should suddenly jump up and let out a cry? And he recalled having heard someone say that the victims of cholera had once leaped up out of their coffins and run away

His thoughts frequently turned to his wife How was she taking it? Sometimes he had a fleeting impulse to steal a moment from his work to go and have a look at Matryona. But he was ashamed of such impulses and would mentally say to her

"Go ahead and wear yourself out, fatty You'll get thin here, all right. And that'll nip your fine plans in the bud "

He always suspected his wife of harbouring intentions humiliating to him as her husband When his suspicions led him to take an objective view of the matter, he was forced to admit she had just cause for harbouring such intentions It

was a puny little life she lived All sorts of ideas could creep into one's head from such a life This objective approach was enough to transform his suspicions into conviction, at least for the time being Now he would ask himself why he had ever climbed out of his basement into this boiling cauldron? And he was at a loss to find an answer But his cogitating went on somewhere deep down inside of him, and the strained attention with which he followed the activities of the doctors served, as it were, as a barrier preventing his thoughts from interfering with his job Never before had he seen people work as selflessly as they did here, and he thought, as he looked at the weary faces of the doctors and students, that here were people who really did earn the money they got

When his work was over at the end of the day, the exhausted Grigory went into the courtyard of the barracks and lay down under the window of the chemist shop His head throbbed, he had a gnawing pain in his stomach, and his feet ached Without a thought or desire, he stretched out on the grass and lay gazing up at some fleecy clouds richly tinged by the setting sun, and soon he was fast asleep

He dreamt that he and his wife were being entertained by one of the doctors in an enormous room whose walls were lined with straight backed chairs On these chairs were sitting all the patients from the barracks. The doctor and Matryona were doing a staid Russian dance in the middle of the floor and he himself was playing the accordion and laughing because the doctor's long legs did not bend and he looked for all the world like a crane in a bog as he followed Matryona round the room with pompous ceremony And all of the patients, too, were rocking with laughter

Suddenly the policeman appeared in the doorway

"Aha!" he cried menacingly "So you thought I had died, did you, Grigory? Threw me in the morgue, and here you are playing the accordion! Well, come along with me Get up!"

Grigory sat up quickly, trembling all over and in a cold sweat Doctor Vaschenko was squatting across from him

"What kind of an attendant are you, my friend, if you sleep on the ground, and what is more on your stomach?" he said reproachfully "If you chill your stomach you'll find yourself laid up, and before you know it you may be dead That won't do, my man You've been given a bed inside the barracks, haven't they told you? You're sweating and you've caught a chill Come along, I'll give you something to take "

"I was feeling sort of tired," murmured Grigory

"All the worse You've got to take care of yourself There's danger about, and we need you, man "

Grigory followed the doctor down the corridor in silence, as silently he gulped down some medicine out of one glass, then out of another, made a face and spat

"Now go and get some sleep," said the doctor, and went striding off on his long thin legs

Grigory watched him go, and then suddenly, with a broad grin, ran after him

"Thanks, doctor "

"What for?" he asked

"For your trouble You can be sure I'll do my very best for you I appreciate your going to such pains for me and and needing me and all that Thanks a lot "

The doctor stared in astonishment at this barracks attendant whose face was radiant with some new joy, and presently his own face broke into a smile

"You're a queer fellow," he said "But that's all right, in fact it's very nice, very sincere Go ahead and do your best not for me, but for the patients We've got to save people from this disease snatch them out of its claws, so to speak We *will* do our best to get the better of it, won't we? But first go and get some sleep "

A minute later Grigory was in bed and drowsing off, pleasantly aware of something warm and soothing inside his stomach He felt happy, and he was proud to have exchanged those few simple words with the doctor

His last thought on falling asleep was that it was too bad Matryona had not heard them He would tell her all about it

the next day But she wouldn't believe him, the little pepper box

He was awakened by his wife's voice the next morning

"Time to go and have your tea, Grigory," she said

He raised his head and looked at her She smiled at him Her hair was neatly combed and she looked wonderfully clean and fresh in her white outfit.

It was pleasant to see her looking like this, but he was disturbed by the thought that this was how she looked to other men in the barracks, too

"Whose tea am I to drink? I have my own tea why should I go anywhere for it?" he said sullenly

"I'll go with you we'll have tea together," she said, gazing at him with a soft look in her eyes

Grigory averted his own eyes and said he would come

When she went out he lay back again and fell to thinking

"What's got into her? Inviting me to have tea with her, and looking at me like that She looks thinner " He felt sorry for her and wanted to do something to please her Perhaps he would buy some sweets for tea But he rejected this idea while he was getting washed No sense in spoiling a woman She could do without the sweets.

They had their tea in a tiny little room with two windows that looked out on a field steeped in the golden light of the rising sun Dew still sparkled on the grass near the windows, and far away, in the rosy haze of early morning, they could see the line of trees marking the post road The sky was clear and a breeze wafted the smell of moist earth and grasses through the window

The table stood against the wall between the windows, and at the table sat three people Grigory, Matryona and a friend of Matryona's a tall, thin middle-aged woman with a pock marked face and kindly grey eyes Her name was Filitsata Yegorovna, she was unmarried, her father had been a Collegiate Assessor, and she always boiled the water for her tea in her own samovar because she could not bear to drink water boiled in the hospital tank All this she

announced to Orlov in a cracked voice, and then, having invited him to sit down next to the window and fill his lungs with "genuinely heavenly air", she went out.

"Did you get tired yesterday?" Grigory asked his wife

"Just awful," she replied vivaciously "I thought my feet would drop off and I was so dizzy I couldn't understand a thing they said to me I was scared to death I'd flop right over hardly held out till evening kept praying all the time 'Help me, Lord,' I kept saying "

"Are you afraid?"

"I'm afraid of the dead ones Do you know " she leaned over and said in an awed whisper " they move when they're dead, honest to goodness they do "

"I saw that myself," said Grigory with a deprecating little laugh "Yesterday Nazarov, the policeman, almost gave me a sock in the jaw after he was dead I was carrying him to the morgue and all of a sudden he gives a swing with his left I hardly had time to duck How do you like that?" He had exaggerated a bit, but it came of itself, without any intention on his part

He enjoyed having tea in this bright clean room with windows looking out on the boundless green fields and blue sky And there was something else he liked, but he was not sure whether it was his wife or himself But most of all he wanted to show the best side of his nature, to be the hero of the day

"Once I set to work in earnest, the ground'll sizzle under my feet, you'll see And I have my reasons For one thing, the people here they don't belong to this world "

And he told her about the talk he had had with the doctor, again exaggerating without noticing it, and this put him in an even better humour

"For another thing, the work itself It's a great work something like war, for instance cholera on one side, patients on the other, and who'll win? It's work that takes brains, and everything's got to be just so After all, what is the cholera. That's a thing you've got to know, and then hit it for all you're worth, right in the weak spot Doctor

Vaschenko said to me 'And you're just the fellow we need for that, Orlov,' he says. Go right after it,' he says, 'drive it out of their feet into their bellies, and there,' he says, 'I'll catch it with something good and bitter And that'll be the end of it, and the patient'll get well and be thankful to me and you all his life, because who kept him from dying? We did!'" and Grigory stuck out his chest and looked at his wife with shining eyes

She smiled back at him wistfully He looked very handsome at this moment, very much like the Grigory she had known before they were married

"We've got people like that in our ward, too so kind hearted and hard working There's one doctor a big fat woman in glasses Awfully nice people, without any airs, and you can always understand what they say to you "

"So you don't mind? You're content?" asked Grigory, whose exhilaration had somewhat abated

"Me? Lord, you can judge for yourself I get twelve rubles, you get twenty, all together thirty-two rubles a month and no expenses at all Look how much we'll be able to save up by winter if the cholera keeps up God willing, we'll manage to crawl out of that basement of ours "

"H'm, that's something to think about," mused Grigory After a little pause he struck his wife on the back in an upsurge of hope and exclaimed, "Ekh, Matryona, the sun'll be shining on us, too, one of these days! Just you keep your chin up!"

She was radiant.

"If only you don't "

"Not a word about that! Choose your needle by the leather, your boots by the weather If life's different, my conduct will be different, too "

"Ah, merciful heavens, if only it'd be like that!"

"None of that now!"

"Grigory, love!"

They were filled with new feeling for each other when they parted, and their hopes made them gay and courageous and ready to work their fingers to the bone

Several times in the next three or four days Grigory was complimented on his quickness and efficiency, and at the same time he noticed that Pronin and a few other attendants were jealous of him and tried to do him little injuries He grew wary and developed a dislike for the fat faced Pronin with whom he had been willing to make friends and have "heart-to-heart" talks. It was very painful to see the undisguised attempts of his comrades to spite him

"The scoundrels," he said to himself, and set his jaw, determined to lose no opportunity of returning tit for tat Involuntarily his thoughts turned to his wife he could tell her everything without fear of her envying his success or pouring carbolic acid on his boots as Pronin had done

The succeeding days were just as busy and exciting as the first had been, but Grigory did not become so worn out, because with every day he expended his strength more rationally He learned to recognise the smells of the different medicines, and when he had made the acquaint ance of ether he used to take great whiffs of it on the sly, having discovered that it gave almost as pleasurable results as a sizable glass of vodka. The doctors and students got to like him more and more for his quickness in grasping orders, his kindness and loquacity, and his ability to entertain the patients The sum total of impressions gained from this new way of life induced in Grigory a mood that was curiously exalted He felt that he was a person of uncommon parts. And within him was born a desire to do something that would attract everyone's attention to him self something that would astound everyone This was no more or less than the desire for self assertion on the part of a creature who had suddenly come to recognise himself as a human being, but who, still entertaining doubts of a fact so new to him, sought a means of convincing himself and others of its reality Little by little his desire for self assertion became transformed into a thirst to perform some great feat of self sacrifice

Such a frame of mind led Grigory to take unnecessary risks One day, for instance, he overstrained himself by

carrying a heavy patient from his bed into the bath all alone, without waiting for help He undertook the care of the dirtiest patients, was contemptuous of the danger of contagion, and accepted the dead with a simplicity that verged on cynicism But this was not enough for him He yearned to do something big, and this yearning grew and grew, tormenting him and driving him to a state of despondency At such times he poured out his heart to his wife, for he had no one else to talk to

One evening when their work was over and they had had their supper, the couple went for a walk in the fields The barracks had been built at some distance from town in a long green valley bordered by a dark strip of woods on one side and a line of city dwellings on the other To the north the field stretched off into the distance, where its green expanses merged with the dim blue horizon, to the south it was cut off by a cliff that followed the course of the river Along this cliff went the post road with its line of old and spreading trees set at even intervals The sun was setting, and above the dark green foliage of the orchards flared the crosses of the churches, throwing back the light in golden rays, the windows of the houses on the outskirts likewise reflected the red flames of the sunset, music was being played somewhere, a smell of resin came from a ravine thickly overgrown with young firs and spruce, the woods poured their heavy perfume into the air, warm gusts of fragrant wind swept gently towards the town It was lovely in those broad empty fields so quiet, and so sweetly sad

Grigory and Matryona walked over the fields in silence, glad to be drinking in this pure air instead of the smells of the barracks

"I wonder where that music's coming from the town or the camp?" Matryona asked her husband, who was plunged in thought

She did not like him to become thoughtful He seemed strange and far away at such times, and they saw so little of each other now that she treasured every moment.

"Music?" asked Grigory like one roused from a dream. "To hell with it, that music! You ought to hear the music playing in my soul! That's real music!"

"What are you saying?" asked Matryona, glancing anxiously into her husband's face.

"I—I don't know. I only know that my heart's on fire. It's space I need—space, so that I could let go with all my strength. Ekh, there's just nothing that could get the better of this strength in me! If, for instance, this cholera was turned into a man, a giant—say Ilya Muromets himself—wouldn't I give it to him, just! A fight to the death! You're strong, and so is Grigory Orlov, so come on, let's see who'll win! I'd squeeze the life out of him and then I'd lie down and die myself. And they'd put a cross on my grave out in the fields, saying: 'Here lies Grigory Andreyevich Orlov, who freed Russia of the cholera.' Nothing more."

His face shone and his eyes flashed as he spoke.

"My big strong man!" murmured Matryona, pressing close to him.

"I'd throw myself against a hundred daggers if I thought any good would come of it. If it would make life any easier. Because I've had a glimpse of what people can be—doctor Vaschenko, for instance, and that student Khokhryakov. You'd never believe the way they work! It's a marvel they're still alive. And do you think they do it for money? Nobody'd work like that for money. That doctor's got a nice little pile, and some more besides, you can be sure of that. But when the old doctor took sick last time, Vaschenko worked four days without even taking off-time to go home. Money don't count with them. It's pity that counts. Pity for others, but no pity for themselves. Who do they pity? Anybody. Mishka Usov, for instance, and Mishka's place is in jail, as everybody knows, because Mishka's a thief and maybe worse. But they did their best to help Mishka get better. And when he got out of bed they were so glad they just laughed. And I want to have a taste of that gladness—lots and lots of it—enough to drown in. Because it hurts just to stand there and watch

while they're laughing with gladness It makes me ache and burn all over Ekh, damn it all!"

And Grigory grew thoughtful again

Matryona said nothing, but her heart was beating painfully She was frightened by her husband's vehemence Behind his words she distinctly perceived the intensity of his yearning, a yearning she did not understand because she did not try to It was her husband who was dear and essential to her, and not some abstract hero

They came to the edge of the ravine and sat down side by side The curly crowns of young birches looked up at them Blue mist clung to the bottom of the ravine, and out of its depths rose a smell of dampness, pine needles, and last year's leaves From time to time a breeze blew, the boughs of the birches swayed, and so did the little fir trees The whole ravine was filled with a timid tremulous murmur, as if someone whom the trees loved dearly had fallen asleep in the shelter of their branches, and they were whispering to each other ever so softly, fearful of waking him up Lights flashed on in the town bright flowers against the dark background of the orchards The Orlovs sat without speaking, he drumming on his knee with his fingers, she gazing up at him and sighing softly

Suddenly she threw her arms about his neck and put her head on his breast

"Grigory, my darling, my love!" she whispered "How wonderful you are to me again, my big strong man! It's as if we were living like we did when we were just married You never say anything to hurt me any more, and you talk to me all the time, telling me what's in your heart, and you don't beat me "

"Is that what you're longing for? I can give you a thumping if you want it," he joked tenderly, caught up in a wave of love and pity for his wife

He began to stroke her hair and found it pleasant so fatherly as if she were a child And Matryona really was like a child, curled up in a soft warm ball in his arms and nestling against his breast

"Darling," she murmured

He took a deep breath and words that were new to him and to her came pouring out of his mouth of their own accord

"My little kitten Say what you will, but there's no friend like your husband And you keep looking round for someone else If I was hard on you sometimes, that was just because of the misery Living there in that hole, never seeing the light, not knowing what people were really like My eyes were opened as soon as I got out of that hole, but I was blind until then Now I know that, say what you will, your wife's your best friend Because, to tell you the truth, most people are just vermin All they want is to give people boils Pronin and Vasyukov, for instance But they can go to sh, not a word, Matryona! We'll come round yet, just you keep your chin up! We'll start to live decent and sensible Come, what's the matter, you little simpleton?"

She was weeping tears of happiness and she answered his question with kisses.

"Love," he whispered and kissed her in turn

And so both of them kissed each other's tears away, and both tasted their salty flavour And for a long time Grigory went on uttering words that were new to him

It grew dark The star strewn sky gazed down on the earth in solemn sadness, and the fields were as quiet as the sky

They had formed the habit of having breakfast together On the morning after their talk in the fields, Grigory came to his wife's room looking glum and self-conscious Felitsata was ill and so Matryona was alone She turned a radiant face to him, but it clouded instantly

"What's the matter? Aren't you well?"

"I'm all right," he answered coldly, taking his chair

"Then what is it?"

"I couldn't sleep Lay awake thinking The way we billed and-cooed, you and me, last night regular softies And now I'm ashamed of myself That won't do You

women are always thinking of ways of twisting a man round your little finger But don't think you can do that to me! Nothing'll come of it. You can't trap me, I'll not fall for your wiles, and don't you forget it!

He said this with great emphasis, but without looking at his wife Matryona kept her eyes on his face and her lips were oddly twisted.

"So you're sorry you and me were so close last night, are you?" she murmured "Sorry you kissed me and loved me, is that it? If you only knew how it hurts to hear you say such a thing! You'll break my heart with your cruel words What is it you want? Are you tired of me? Don't you love me any more, or what?"

She looked at him suspiciously, and there was bitterness and challenge in her tone

"N no," said Grigory uncomfortably, "but on the whole you know what kind of a life you and me lived The very thought of it's enough to turn your stomach And now we've climbed out of it and I'm scared Everything changed so sudden It's as if I was a different man, and you, too What does it mean? What will happen next?"

"Whatever God wills, Grigory," said Matryona gravely "But don't you be sorry you was so loving last night "

"All right, drop it," cut in Grigory, again feeling self-conscious "I don't expect anything to come of our life together The old life was none too rosy, but this new one don't suit me either Even if I don't drink, or beat you, or swear "

She gave a hysterical little laugh

"You have no time to do any of those things now," she said

"I could always find time to drink," smiled her husband "But I don't want to that's the marvel! And on the whole I don't know whether it's because I'm ashamed or afraid " he threw back his head and fell to thinking

"The Lord only knows what's the matter with you," said Matryona with a profound sigh "It's a good life we live here, even if we do work hard The doctors like you, you

don't let yourself do anything you shouldn't what else do you want? You're such a restless creature!"

"That's the truth, I am restless All night I kept thinking Pyotr Ivanovich says all people are equal, and aren't I just like anybody else? But Doctor Vasilenko is better than me, and so is Pyotr Ivanovich and lots of others In other words, they're not my equal and I'm not theirs and I know it They cured Mishka Usov and were glad of it and I can't understand a thing like that Why be glad because a person's cured? The life he leads is worse than cholera convulsions if the truth be told They know this, and still they're glad And I'd like to be glad like they are, but I can't Because what's there to be glad about, when you come right down to it?"

"But they feel sorry for people," objected Matryona "In our ward, too, you ought to see what goes on when a woman starts to get better! And when they send her home, poor girl, they give her money and medicine and advice It makes you want to cry, they're so good "

"Cry? It just makes me surprised, that's all " Grigory shrugged his shoulders, scratched his head and gave his wife a puzzled look

In a sudden burst of eloquence she began to prove to him that people ought to be pitied She leaned towards him, her soft eyes fixed on his face, and talked about people and the hardness of their lives, and he gazed back at her and thought

"She talks good! Where does she get the words from?"

"And you pity them, too Didn't you say you'd squeeze the life out of the cholera if you had the strength? And yet why should you? Life's been better for you since the cholera came "

Grigory burst out laughing

"That's the truth! It really has been better Ekh, damn it all! People dying and me getting on better because of it! That's life for you!"

Still laughing, he got up and went to work As he was walking down the corridor he thought what a pity it was no one else had heard what Matryona said "A pretty speech

she made She may be a woman, but she understands a thing or two " He was in a pleasant frame of mind when he went into the men's ward, from which came the moans and the hoarse breathing of the patients

Matryona felt that she was becoming more and more important to her husband and she did everything in her power to make this so The busy energetic life she was leading raised her in her own estimation She was not given to pondering and weighing things, but whenever she recalled her life in the basement, taken up entirely with looking after her husband and their little household, she could not help comparing it with the present, and little by little the dismal memory of their existence in that hole faded out of her mind The authorities at the barracks came to love her for her deftness and industry, everyone was kind to her and treated her as a human being, a thing she had never known before, and this spurred her on to greater effort

Once, during the night shift, the fat doctor asked her about her former life, and Matryona willingly and frankly told her everything Suddenly she broke off and gave a little laugh

"What are you laughing at?" asked the doctor

"Nothing special But it was an awful way to live and can you believe it? I never knew it Not until this very minute "

After that review of the past, Matryona developed a curious attitude towards her husband She loved him as much as ever, loved him with the blind love of the female, but now it seemed to her that Grigory owed her something Sometimes when she was talking to him she adopted a protective tone, for his restless tirades often moved her to pity But there were moments when she doubted that she and her husband would ever live a quiet peaceful life, although she believed that Grigory would settle down and the misery he suffered would abate

They had been fated to find each other, and the two of them, both young, strong, and industrious, would have gone on living a dreary half famished existence devoted wholly to

the daily struggle for bread had they not been spared this by what Grigory called "the restlessness in his heart" which would not let him reconcile himself to the daily grind

One gloomy September morning the waggon came into the courtyard of the barracks, and Pronin lifted out of it a little paint-stained boy livid, emaciated, scarcely drawing breath

"Another one from the Petunnikov house on Mokry Street," said the driver when he was asked where the patient came from

"Senka!" exclaimed Grigory unhappily "You poor little pup! Senka, do you know me?"

"Y yes," said Senka with difficulty, slowly rolling up his eyes to see Orlov, who was holding the head of the stretcher and bending over him

"Such a lively little cricket! How did this ever happen to you?" asked Grigory He was strangely moved by the sight of this child in the throes of disease, and his conflicting emotions were reduced to one question as he stood there shaking his head dolefully

"Why should a child have to get it?"

Senka shivered and said nothing

They put him to bed and began taking off his rags, stained every colour of the rainbow

"I'm cold," said Senka

"We're going to give you a hot bath and make you well," said Grigory

"You can't make me well," whispered Senka. "Uncle Grigory, bend down . your ear I stole the accordion . it's in the woodshed three days ago I touched it for the first time .. after I had stolen it It's a marvel I hid it . and that's when I got the belly ache See? Because I sinned it's hanging on the wall under the stairs I stacked some wood in front of it. Give it back, Uncle Grigory The accordionist had a sister she asked for it give it to her " He uttered a groan and went off into a fit of convulsions

Everything possible was done to save him, but life had been unable to take a firm hold in Senka's undernourished body, and in the evening Grigory carried him to the morgue He felt as if someone had done him a personal injury

In the morgue Grigory tried to straighten the child's limbs, but he could not He went away crushed, disheartened, carrying in his mind a picture of the twisted body of this little boy, once so lively

He was robbed of strength by the realisation of his helplessness in the face of death How carefully he had tended Senka, how frenziedly the doctors had worked over him and yet he had died It filled him with resentment. One of these days the disease would seize Grigory, too, tie him into knots, and that would be the end He was frightened, gripped by loneliness. If only he could talk to some wise person about all this! More than once he had tried to get into conversation with one of the students, but none of them had time to philosophise There was nothing to do but go and talk to his wife And he went, sad and gloomy

She was washing herself in the corner and the samovar was boiling on the table, filling the room with its hissing and steaming

Grigory sat down without a word and gazed at his wife's smooth shoulders The samovar gurgled, water splashed, Matryona snorted, footsteps passed up and down in the corridor and Grigory tried to guess by the sound whose they were

Suddenly it seemed to him that Matryona's shoulders were as cold and clammy as Senka's had been as he lay in convulsions. He shuddered

"Senka died," he announced in a dull voice

"Senka! May the Lord receive his soul in peace," intoned Matryona reverently, and then she began to spit and sputter the soap had got into her mouth

"A pity," sighed Grigory

"He was a little devil "

"Well, he's dead now, and it's not for you to say what he

was or what he was like And it's a great pity he's dead He was a quick one That accordion, now er h'm A nimble little fellow Sometimes I used to look at him and wonder if I oughtn't to take him on as a sort of 'prentice An orphan We'd have got used to him and he'd have been like a son to us. You're a strong healthy woman, but you don't have any children Had one baby and that's all Too bad If we had some little shavers running round, life wouldn't be so empty This way, what are we working for? To feed ourselves And what's that for? To go on working And the crazy wheel goes round and round It'd be different if we had children "

He hung his head as he spoke, and his tone was sad and complaining Matryona, who was standing in front of him, grew paler and paler as she listened

"I'm healthy, you're healthy, and still we have no children," went on Grigory "Why's that? I keep thinking about it. It's this that drives me to drink "

"That's a lie," said Matryona in a loud voice "That's a lie! Don't dare say such a foul thing to me, hear? Don't dare! You drink just for the mischief of it because you can't control yourself That's a lie!"

Grigory was stunned He leaned back in his chair to get a better look at his wife and could not believe it was she Never before had he seen her in such a rage, never before had she looked at him with such withering scorn or spoken with such force

"Well?" drawled Grigory tauntingly, gripping the edge of his chair with both hands "Well? What else have you to say?"

"Lots! I would never have said it if you hadn't thrown this in my teeth I don't bear you any children? No, and I never will! I can't! I'll never have a child!" The cry was smothered in sobs

"Don't shout," said her husband

"And why won't I? Remember how often you beat me? The number of times you kicked me in the belly? Go ahead and count them! Remember how you slammed and pounded me? Do you know how much blood I lost because

of your floggings? My night-dress would be soaked to the very top! That's why I don't bear you any children, loving husband! And how dare you throw it in my teeth now? You ought to be ashamed to let me see that mug of yours You're a murderer, that's what you are! You murdered your own children, and now you blame me for not having any! I've borne everything, I've forgiven you everything, but I won't forgive you those words as long as I live! To my dying day I'll remember them! Don't you really know it's you who's to blame, because of the beatings you gave me? Am I any different from other women that I shouldn't want children? How many nights have I laid awake praying God to save the child in my womb from your blows, you murderer! The sight of other people's children made me choke with envy, and with pity for myself Holy Virgin, how I wanted a child! I used to fondle that Senka on the sly me . a barren woman! Oh, merciful God!"

She gasped for breath The words poured out of her mouth incoherently Her face grew splotched, she trembled all over and clutched at her breast, sobs rose in her throat Grigory, pale and distraught, stared wide-eyed at this woman he had never seen before And he was afraid of her—afraid she would spring at his throat and strangle him that was the threat in those wild eyes, flaming with vengeance She was twice as strong as he was now, he realised it, and was afraid He could not get up and strike her as he would certainly have done had it not been for the transformation wrought in her by some mighty force

"It's my soul you injured Great is the sin you committed against me! But I suffered it all and said nothing because I loved you But I won't let you throw this in my teeth! That's more than I can bear May you be damned in hell for the words you spoke!"

"Hold your tongue!" muttered Grigory, baring his teeth

"Here, what's all this noise about? Have you forgotten where you are?"

There was a film over Grigory's eyes. He could not make out who was standing in the doorway, and with a fierce oath

he pushed the person aside and rushed out into the fields Matryona remained standing in the middle of the room for a moment, and then staggered to the bed as if blind, with outstretched hands, and collapsed with a groan

It grew dark An inquisitive golden moon peered through tattered clouds into the room But soon a fine rain, harbinger of the endless, dismal rains of autumn, came pattering against the walls and windows of the barracks

The pendulum of the clock marked the passing of the seconds, drops of rain kept hammering at the window pane The hours went by one after another, the rain fell, and the woman lay motionless on the bed, her inflamed eyes fixed on the ceiling, her teeth clenched, her cheek bones protruding And still the rain pattered on walls and windows. It seemed to be muttering some wearisome monotony over and over, anxious to convince somebody of something, but, being of too sluggish a temperament to do this swiftly and beautifully, it hoped to accomplish it by reiterating a dull sermon in which there was none of the sincerity of true belief

The rain fell even when the dawn brought a feeble brightness to the sky, portending a gloomy day Matryona could not go to sleep In the monotonous patter of the rain sounded a frightening question

"What will happen next?"

And the answer flashed forth in a vision of her drunken husband It was hard for her to relinquish her dream of a peaceful life filled with love She had nurtured this dream, driving out of her mind all premonitions that it was unattainable Yet she knew very well that if Grigory should take to drinking again she could not go on living with him She had seen him different, she herself was different, and the thought of her former life filled her with revulsion and terror feelings she had not known before But she was a woman, and as such she blamed herself for this rupture with her husband

"How did it ever happen? Oh, God! As if I had broke loose!"

It grew light A dense fog hung over the fields, concealing the sky

"Matryona Orlova! Time to report for duty!"

She got up in obedience to the call, washed herself hastily and went into the barracks, feeling weak and ill Her lassitude, her lack lustre eyes and cheerless face caused surprise in the ward

"Aren't you well?" one of the doctors asked her

"It's nothing "

"Don't hesitate to tell us We can have someone else take your place "

Matryona was ashamed, she did not want her fears and sufferings to be known to this woman who, though kind, was nevertheless a stranger Drawing on the last stores of courage in her anguished soul, she said with a little laugh

"It's nothing Me and my man just had a little tiff It'll pass. It's not the first time "

"You poor thing," sighed the doctor, who knew what her life had been

Matryona had an impulse to bury her face in this woman's bosom and give vent to her feelings But she merely pressed her lips tightly together and put her hand to her throat to press the sobs back into her chest.

When her work was over she went back to her room and looked out of the window The waggon was coming over the fields towards the barracks probably bringing another patient A fine rain was falling There was nothing else to be seen Matryona turned away with a sigh and sat down at the table

"What will happen next?" was the question that absorbed her

For a long time she sat there in a sort of daze, but every time a step was heard out in the corridor she would start, rise in her chair, and turn to the door

But when at last the door was opened and Grigory came in she did not start and did not get up, for it was as if the autumn clouds had descended out of the sky and were pressing her down with all their might.

Grigory stopped in the doorway, threw his wet cap on the floor and strode noisily over to his wife Water was dripping off his clothes His face was red, his eyes bleary, his lips stretched in a broad and foolish grin Matryona could hear the water slopping inside his boots He looked wretched, and she had not expected this

"A fine sight," she said

He nodded his head foolishly

"Want me to fall on my knees to you?" he asked

She did not answer

"You don't, do you? Just as you say All this time I've been trying to decide whether I've done you wrong or not Looks as if I have, and so I say do you want me to fall down on my knees to you?"

Still she did not answer She could smell the fumes of vodka coming from him, and bitterness filled her heart

"Look here, none of your airs You'd better talk while I'm still peaceable," said Grigory, raising his voice "Are you going to forgive me or not?"

"You're drunk," said Matryona, drawing in her breath Go and sleep it off "

"That's a lie, I'm not drunk, I'm just tired I've been walking all this time and thinking Oh, all the things I've thought of! You'd better watch out!"

He shook his finger at her and gave a twisted smile

"Why don't you say something?" he asked

"I can't talk to you "

"You can't? Why not?"

Suddenly he flared up and his voice grew firmer

"You shouted at me here last night bawled at me, and here I am asking you to forgive me You'd better think that over "

His voice was sinister, his lips twitched and his nostrils were dilated Matryona knew what that meant, and her mind resurrected scenes from their former life the basement, the fights on Saturday night, all the violence and misery of their existence

"I have thought it over," she said crisply "I see the beast's come out in you again "

"The beast? What's that got to do with it? I'm asking you to forgive me Do you think I need your forgiveness? I can get on very well without it, but I've decided you're going to forgive me, see?"

"Go away, Grigory," cried the woman miserably, twisting away from him

"Go away?" he said with an ugly laugh "So that you can be free to do what you want? Oh, no Where did you get that idea?"

He seized her by the shoulder, jerked her to him and flourished a knife in her face a short thick rusty blade

"Ekh, if you'd only kill me!" she said with a profound sigh, and, shaking him off, turned away again He dropped back, struck less by her words than by the tone in which they were uttered He had heard her say this before, but never in such a way A moment before he would have struck her easily, but now he could not and would not He flung the knife on the table, almost frightened by her indiffe renee "What the devil do you want of me?" he muttered viciously

"There's nothing I want of you," gasped Matryona. "Did you come here to kill me? Well, go ahead!"

Grigory looked at her without speaking, completely at a loss He had come here determined to bring his wife into subjection In their clash of the preceding evening she had proved the stronger, he was aware of this and considered it an indignity He knew very definitely that he must that he simply *had to* make her submit to him again A passionate man, he had thought and suffered much in the last twenty four hours, but the obscurity of his mind kept him from comprehending the emotional chaos produced in him by his wife's just accusation He sensed that she was in revolt, and so he had brought a knife to frighten her with And he would have killed her if she had shown more spirit in resisting him But there she stood, defenseless, broken by

misery, and yet stronger than he was That was what stung him, and the sting had a sobering effect

"Listen," he said, "climb down off your high horse You know me I really will jam this thing between your ribs, and that'll be the end Amen Very simple "

He knew very well that this was not what he ought to say, and so he stopped Matryona did not move a muscle where she stood with her back to him That same question was throbbing in her mind

"What will happen next?"

"Matryona," said Grigory softly, leaning towards her over the table, "after all, is it my fault if if things aren't what they should be?"

He bowed his head and drew in a deep breath

"Life's rotten Do you call this living? There's the cholera patients, of course, but what of it? Do they make things easier for me? Some of them die, others get well, but me I've got to go on living How? This isn't life, it's just one big convulsion Is that fair? I see how everything is, but it's hard for me to explain why I can't go on living this way any more Look at all the care and attention they get And me? I'm well, but if my soul's sick does that make me worth less than they are? Just think, I m worse than the cholera patients I've got convulsions of the soul And you shout at me Call me a brute A drunk Ekh, woman's logic!"

He spoke quietly and reasonably, but she scarcely heard him because she was sternly going over the past in her mind

"So you have nothing to say," said Grigory, feeling some strong new emotion welling up inside of him "Why don't you say something? What is it you want of me?"

"There's nothing I want of you," exclaimed Matryona "Can't you leave me alone? What do you want?"

"What do I want? I want I want "

But here Grigory realised he could not say what he wanted could not say it in a way that would make it instantly clear to him and to her He knew that a gulf had opened between them, that no words could span it.

And this threw him into a wild frenzy He swung his arm and brought his fist down on the back of his wife's head, roaring like a maniac

"What are you up to, you bitch? What's your game? I'll kill you!"

The blow knocked her head against the table, but she jumped to her feet and shot her husband a glance full of hate

"Hit me again," she said in a loud steady voice

"Shut your mouth!"

"Hit me again Come on "

"O-o-o-o, you she devil!"

"This is the end, Grigory I've had enough "

"Shut your mouth!"

"I won't let you have your way with me any more "

He ground his teeth and took a step backwards, perhaps to take another swing at her

But at that moment the door opened and in stepped Doctor Vaschenko

"What do you call this? Where do you think you are? What are you up to?"

He looked severe, and at the same time shocked Grigory was not disconcerted in the least, he even made a little bow to him

"Nothing special Just a little fumigation between man and wife" and he laughed hysterically in the doctor's face

"Why didn't you report for work?" snapped the doctor, irritated by his levity

Grigory shrugged his shoulders

"I couldn't Had some business of my own to attend to," he announced

"And who made a row here last night?"

"We "

"You? Splendid You behave as if you were at home go off without permission, and "

"We're not your slaves just because "

"Silence! You've turned this room into a pub, you beast! I'll show you where you are!"

An upsurge of mad defiance, a wild longing to throw everything up and escape from the tangle in which his soul was caught swept over Grigory. He felt that the moment had come when he would do something exceptional, and that this would instantly loose the fetters binding his groping soul. A shudder passed over him and he had a cold sensation in the pit of his stomach as he turned to the doctor and said, grinning like a Cheshire cat:

"Don't shout, you'll burst a blood-vessel. I know damn well where I am—in the slaughter-house!"

"Wha-at? What did you say?" asked the dumbstruck doctor, swaying towards him.

Grigory knew he had said something outrageous, but this aggravated instead of calming his passion.

"That's all right, you'll get over it. Matryona, gather your belongings together."

"Oh, no you don't, my fine fellow! Be so good as to answer my question," said the doctor with ominous tranquillity. "For that, I'll—"

"Don't shout, and don't make a scene," interrupted Grigory, staring him brazenly in the face. As he talked he felt as if he were advancing in jumps, and with every jump his breath came easier. "You seem to think the cholera gives you a right to order me about. Nothing of the sort. As for this medicine of yours—nobody needs it. Maybe I went too far about the slaughter-house, but stop your shouting just the same."

"What's this!" said the doctor quietly. "I'll teach you a lesson. Hey! This way!"

People were already crowding into the corridor. Grigory narrowed his eyes and set his teeth.

"I'm not lying and I'm not afraid. And if you think you're going to teach me a lesson, I'll tell you a few more things."

"You will? Go ahead."

"I'll go into town and give them an earful 'Hey, fellows I'll say, 'd'ye know how they treat the cholera there?'"

"What's that?" gasped the doctor

"And then we'll give you a fumigation here with fireworks and 'luminations"

"Damn it all, what nonsense are you talking?" The doctor's astonishment had given way to exasperation with this fellow whom he had known as a diligent and sensible worker, but who now, for some incredible reason, was sticking his head in a noose

"What are you saying, you fool?"

Fool The word re-echoed in all the recesses of Grigory's being, he knew the judgement to be a fair one, but this only heightened his sense of injury

"What am I saying? I know what And it's all the same to me," he said, his eyes flashing "Everything's always the same for people like me, I can see that now And there's no reason why we should hide our feelings Come along, Matryona, get your belongings together"

"I'm not going anywhere," said Matryona firmly

The doctor stared at them round-eyed and rubbed his forehead, completely nonplussed

"You're either drunk or insane Do you realise what you're doing?"

Grigory did not retreat, he could not

"What do *you* realise?" he jeered "What are *you* doing? Fumigation, ha, ha! Cure the sick and let the healthy die from the rummy lives they live Matryona, I'll smash your face if you don't come along this minute"

"I'm not going with you"

She was pale and unnaturally calm, and there was cold determination in her eyes And in spite of his heroic swagger, Grigory turned away and hung his head in silence

"Damn!" said the doctor "The devil himself couldn't make head or tail of this Get out of here, you! Get out, and be thankful I let you off easy I ought to have you arrested, you blockhead! Get out!"

Grigory glanced up at the doctor and hung his head again. He would have felt better if they had given him a beating or packed him off to the police-station.

"I'm asking you for the last time—are you coming?" Grigory said to his wife hoarsely.

"No, I'm not," she replied, shrinking as if in expectation of a blow.

Grigory waved an arm.

"Then you can all be damned. What the hell do I need you for?"

"Come, you idiot," began the doctor in a tone meant to bring him to his senses.

"Shut up!" shouted Grigory. "Well, you damned hussy, I'm going. Maybe we'll never see each other again, and maybe we will—just as I see fit. But if we do, you can be sure it'll go hard with you!"

And he made for the door.

"Farewell, tragedian," said the doctor sarcastically as Grigory passed him.

Grigory halted and raised eyes smouldering with misery.

"Leave me alone," he said quietly. "Don't wind me up all over again. The spring went off without hurting anybody this time. Let it go at that."

He picked up his cap off the floor, stuck it on his head, hunched his shoulders, and went out without so much as a glance at his wife.

The doctor watched her anxiously. Her face was very white.

"What's the matter with him?" the doctor said, nodding towards Grigory.

"I don't know."

"Where will he go now?"

"To get drunk," said Matryona unhesitatingly.

The doctor lifted his eyebrows and went out.

Matryona looked out of the window. A man's form was hurrying through the dusk, through the rain and the wind, striding down the road leading into town. Alone, in the midst of those wet grey fields....

Matryona's face grew even whiter. She walked over to the icon corner and fell on her knees before the holy images, bowing to the floor again and again, gasping out the words of a prayer in an impassioned stream, rubbing her throat and her breast with trembling fingers.

One day I visited a trade school in the town of X. My guide was a man of my acquaintance who had helped to found the school. As he led me through model classrooms, he said:

"As you see, we have something to be proud of. Our young people are getting on famously. And you'd be surprised what a fine group of teachers we've enlisted. In the shoe-making shop, for instance, the teacher is a simple cobbler—a woman—a tempting little piece, but of impeccable behaviour. But what am I telling you this for? As I was saying—a simple cobbler, but how she works! And what a gifted teacher she is, and how she loves her pupils! Quite extraordinary. You never saw such a busy little bee, and all for twelve rubles a month and a room in the school. She even supports two orphans on that meagre sum. An exceptionally interesting personality."

My friend was so lavish in his praise of this cobbler that I became anxious to meet her.

This was easily arranged, and one day Matryona Orlova told me the sad story of her life. For some time after she left her husband he gave her no peace; he came to see her in a drunken state, made scenes, waited for her whenever she went out, and beat her mercilessly. She endured it all.

When the barracks were closed, one of the doctors offered to help place her in this school and to see that she was protected from her husband. This was done, and Matryona entered upon a life of peaceful labour. Several nurses of her acquaintance taught her to read and write; she adopted two orphans from an asylum—a boy and a girl—and threw herself into her work, contented with her lot, but recalling her past with fear and sorrow. Nothing was

too much for her to do for her pupils, she took a broad view of the importance of her work, was very conscientious and won the respect of those in charge of the school But she had a nasty dry cough, a malignant flush burned in the hollows of her cheeks, and sadness hovered in her grey eyes

I made the acquaintance of Grigory, too I found him in the slums of the town and became his friend after two or three encounters He repeated the story his wife had told me, and added, after brief reflection

"So that's how it was, Maxim Savvateyevich I got lifted up for a space and then slapped down again And so I never did the big thing I dreamed of doing But I've still got this hankering to do something big to grind the earth into powder or lead a band of thieves, or do anything else to set me up above others, so that I can look down on them and spit on them And I'd say to them 'Ekh, you vermin! What are you living for? What sort of lives do you live? You're nothing but a lot of two-faced swindlers, that's what you are!' And then I'd come hurtling down from the heights, head over heels, and bang! That'd be the end Ekh, how dull and stuffy life is! When I got Matryona off my neck I says to myself 'Clear sailing ahead now, Grigory! The anchor's up!' But it didn't turn out that way Shallow water I ran onto a reef and I've been high and dry ever since But I don't mean to go to pot Not I I'll show people what I can do yet How? No one but the devil knows that My wife? To hell with her! What does a fellow like me want with a wife? Or she with me, a guy who feels a pull in all four directions at once? I was born with this unrest in my heart It's my fate to be a tramp I've walked and I've rode to all sorts of places No comfort anywhere Drink? Of course I drink Vodka's good for putting out fires, and it's a big fire that's raging inside me! I'm sick of everything towns and villages and people of all sizes and makes Hell, couldn't anything better than this have been thought of? Every man pitted against his neighbour I'd like nothing better than to squeeze the lights out of all of them Ekh, life! An invention of the devil "

The heavy door of the pub in which Grigory and I were sitting kept swinging open, squeaking each time And the inside of the pub was like a great jaw that was slowly but surely devouring impecunious Russians, one after another . those who were restless and those who were not

1897

The Reader*

It was night when I left the house where I had been reading a recently published story of mine to a gathering of close acquaintances Their praise had been lavish and I walked down the deserted street, feeling that never before had I experienced such joy in being alive

The February night was clear and the cloudless star studded sky breathed an invigorating cold on the earth in its splendid regalia of fresh fallen snow The branches hanging over the fences cast quaintly patterned shadows in my path and snowflakes sparkled joyfully in the caressing blue radiance of the moonlight There was not a living soul to be seen and the crunch of the snow underfoot was the only sound that broke the stillness of that serene and, for me, memorable night

Yes, it's good to be something in the world, to stand out among one's fellow creatures, I thought

And my imagination spared no bright colours in painting a picture of my future

"Yes, your little piece was quite delightful, I would grant you that," said a thoughtful voice behind me

I gave a start and looked round

A little man dressed in black overtook me and fell into step at my side, looking up into my face with a sharp smile Everything about him was sharp his glance, his cheekbones, his chin with its tapering imperial, his whole trim figure had an eye pricking angularity He moved lightly and soundlessly, as if gliding over the snow I had not seen him in the room where I had been reading and was understandably surprised by his remark Who was he? Where had he sprung from?

"Were you were you there too?" I asked

* English translation © Progress Publishers 1978

"Yes, I had that pleasure "

He spoke in a tenor voice His lips were thin and the small black moustache did not conceal their smile The persistence of that smile created an unpleasant impression I felt it implied some caustic idea that would prove unflatter ing to me But I was in too good a mood to spend much time observing this aspect of my new companion, and the impression dissolved like a shadow in the glow of my own self satisfaction I walked along with him, wondering what he would say and secretly hoping that he would add to the number of pleasurable moments I had experienced that evening Man is greedy because fortune smiles kindly upon him too seldom

"It is good to feel that one is something out-of the ordinary, is it not?" my companion asked

I noticed nothing to take exception to in this remark and hastened to agree with him

"Tee hee hee!" he gave brittle laugh, nervously rubbing his small hands with their thin, tenacious fingers

"You are a cheerful person," I remarked drily, stung by his laughter

"Yes, I am a cheerful person," he affirmed, smiling and cocking his head on one side "And I am also very inquisitive I always want to know things to know everything It's a perpetual urge with me, it's what keeps me going And the thing I want to know is how much does your success cost you?"

I looked at him and replied reluctantly

"About a month's work a little more perhaps "

"Aha!" he responded with alacrity "A little toil, a little experience of everyday life, which is always worth some thing Still, it's not such a high price to pay for your awareness that at this very moment several thousand people are living your thoughts, reading your work And after that come hopes that perhaps, in the course of time ha ha! And when you are dead ha ha ha! For all that you would be willing to give a little more, a little more than you have given us already Is that not so?"

He broke out again into his stinging, pellet like laughter, surveying me slyly with his sharp, black eyes I surveyed him too, looking down on him, and asked coldly, offendedly,

"Excuse me . With whom have I the pleasure of talk ing?"

"Who am I? Haven't you guessed? Well, just for the moment I won't say who I am Surely it isn't more important for you to know a person's name than what he has to tell you?"

"Of course, not But this is all very strange," I replied

For some reason he touched my coatsleeve and, still chuckling quietly, said, "Well, let it seem strange Why shouldn't a man allow himself occasionally to venture beyond the bounds of common experience? And if you have no objections, let us speak frankly! Imagine that I am a reader a strange reader, let us say, a reader who is very curious and would like to know just why and how books are written your books, for example? Let's discuss that "

"Oh, by all means," I said "I shall be delighted It's not every day that one has the chance of such meetings and conversations " But I was lying In reality I was beginning to find the whole thing unpleasant What did the fellow want? Why should I allow this casual encounter with a perfect stranger to become a kind of debate?

All the same I walked along slowly at his side, trying to assume an expression of polite attention As I recall, I had some difficulty in doing so, but as I still had an ample reserve of high spirits and did not want to offend the man by refusing to talk to him, I decided to keep myself under control

The moon was behind us and our shadows lay in our path They had merged into a single dark patch that crawled ahead of us on the snow and as I looked at them, I felt something begin to grow inside me that, like these shadows, was dark, elusive and, like them, also ahead of me

My companion was silent for a minute, then spoke in the confident tone of a man who is master of his thoughts

"There is nothing more important and fascinating in life than the motives of human behaviour Is that not so?"

I nodded

"You agree! Then let us discuss things frankly never miss the chance of a frank discussion while you are still young!"

What a strange person, I thought, and with sudden interest I asked, smiling wryly, "But what shall we discuss?"

He looked hard at me for a moment, then exclaimed with a familiarity one would expect only from an old acquaintance, "We shall discuss the aims of literature!"

"Yes, but isn't it rather late?"

"Too late! No it is not yet too late for you!"

These words brought me up short He had uttered them with such earnest assurance, and they sounded metaphorical, I halted with a feeling that I wanted to ask him something but he took my arm and led me on with gentle persistence

"Don't stop You're on a good road with me Well, we've had enough introduction! Tell me, what does literature want? You serve it, so you ought to know "

My astonishment was growing to the detriment of my self-control What did this man want of me? Who was he?

"Now listen," I said, "you must agree that all this "

"Is taking place for a perfectly good reason, believe me! Nothing in the world happens without some good reason for its happening So let us proceed a little faster, not forward, but deeper "

This crank was certainly interesting, but he annoyed me I made another impatient move to walk on, he followed me, speaking calmly

"I quite understand You find it difficult at the moment to give any definition of the aim that literature pursues I will attempt such a definition myself "

He drew a deep breath, then looked into my face with a smile

"You will agree with me if I say that the aim of literature is to help man to understand himself, to enhance his belief

in himself and develop his desire to seek truth, to fight meanness and pettiness in people to bring out the good, to awaken in their hearts the sense of shame, anger and courage, to do everything to make people nobly strong and capable of endowing their lives with the sacred spirit of beauty That's my formula, it is, of course, only a bare outline Fill it in with everything that can inspire life and tell me do you agree with this definition?"

"Yes, you are right " I said "Near enough anyway It is generally accepted that the task of literature is to ennoble mankind "

"Then what a great cause you serve!" the man said impressively and gave another of his caustic laughs

"But why are you saying all this?" I asked, pretending to be unaffected by his laughter

"Why do you think?"

"To be quite frank " I began, trying vainly to think of some cutting remark What did being frank mean? This man was no fool, he must know how restricted were the frontiers of human frankness and how sternly they were guarded by self respect When I looked again at my companion I felt deeply wounded by his smile it carried so much irony and contempt! I felt the beginnings of fear, a fear that urged me to escape at once

"Good night," I said curtly, raising my hat

"Why?" he exclaimed softly

"I don't like jokes that are taken to excess "

"And you are going away? Well, it's your own affair But remember that if you go now we shall never meet again "

He stressed the word "never" and it rang in my ears like the stroke of a funeral bell I have always hated that word and feared it It is like something heavy and cold like a huge hammer specially designed by fate for demolishing human hopes It was this word that stopped me

"What is it you want?" I asked with misery and hatred

"Let's sit down," he said, laughing once again and, taking my arm firmly, he pulled me down

At that moment we were in the municipal gardens, on a path overhung with the motionless, icy branches of locust and lilac bushes They hung over me scintillating in the moonlight and I felt as if these rigid branches, encrusted with ice and frost, were piercing my chest, thrusting deep into my heart

Astonished and puzzled by my companion's behaviour, I stared at him in silence

There must be something wrong with him, I thought, trying to offer myself a comforting explanation of the man's behaviour But he seemed to divine my thought

"You think I am abnormal? Drop all that It's such a cheap and obnoxious idea! How often under such pretexts do we refuse to understand somebody simply because he is more original than ourselves, and how persistently does this idea perpetuate and accentuate the deplorable superficiality of our relationships with one another!"

"Yes, indeed " I said, feeling more and more embar rassed in the presence of this man "But, if you will excuse me, I must go My time is up "

"Go then," he said with a shrug "Go but remember that you hasten only to lose your true identity " He let go of my arm and I walked away

I left him in the park on a hill over the Volga, a hill sheathed in snow and criss-crossed by the dark ribbons of footpaths Before him lay a broad view of the silent dreary plain beyond the river He sat down on one of the benches and stared into the remote distance and I walked away down the path, already feeling that I would not get away from him and yet still walking Should I walk slow or fast, to show the man how little he meant to me?

I heard him begin to whistle some familiar tune It was that sad and humorous little song about the blind man leading the blind Why should he choose that particular song, I thought

And then I realised that from the moment I had met this little man I had been enclosed in a dark circle of strange and totally unexpected sensations My recent serene and compla

cent frame of mind had been invaded by a sense of foreboding

But how can you the leader be
Along a road you cannot see?

I recalled the words of the song the man was whistling I turned round and looked back With one elbow on his knee and his chin resting in his hand, he was watching me and whistling The moon was shining on his face and I could see his black moustache twitching Moved by a feeling that something of great portent was at hand, I decided to go back I strode up to him, sat down beside him and said calmly but with real eagerness, "All right, let's talk in simple terms "

"Simplicity is something we all need," he nodded

"I feel you possess some power to influence me and you obviously have something you wish to tell me Is that so?"

"At last you have found the courage to listen!" he exclaimed with a laugh, but now his laughter was more gentle and there seemed to be something like a ripple of joy in it

"Well, tell me then!" I went on "And without any of your oddities, if you can "

"Very good! But you must agree that these oddities were needed to draw your attention Modern life has blunted our interest in what is clear and simple, it is too hard and cold for us and we have lost the ability to warm and soften anything because we are cold and hard ourselves We, it seems, are again in need of visions, fantasies, dreams and oddities The life we have created lacks colour, it is dull and insipid! The reality that we were once so eager to make anew has crushed and annihilated us What are we to do? Well, let us try Perhaps the power of invention and imagination will help man to rise above the earth for a while and once again discern the place in it which he had lost For it is lost, is it not? Man is no longer lord of the earth He has become a slave of life, by bowing down before facts he has lost the pride that he once took in his primacy Is that not so? From

facts that he himself has created he draws a conclusion and calls it an irrefutable law! And in his obedience to this law he fails to notice that he has blocked his path towards free creativity, restricted himself in the struggle for the right to destroy in order to create. He is not even struggling any more; he merely adapts.... What has he to struggle for? Where are the ideals for which he would perform deeds of valour? That is why life is so mean and dull, that is why man's creative spirit has flagged.... Some seek blindly for that which would lend the mind wings and restore man's faith in himself. Often they go not towards that place wherein lies all that is eternal, that unites humanity, where God dwells.... Those who lose their way in search of truth will perish! Let them perish, let us not hinder them, or pity them—there are plenty of people in the world! What matters is the urge, the desire to find God, and if there are souls possessed of the desire to find God, He will be with them and give them life, because He is the eternal striving for perfection.... Is that not so?"

"Yes," I said, "that is so."

"You are certainly good at agreeing," my companion observed with another sarcastic laugh, and then fell silent, gazing into the distance. His pause was too long for me and I sighed impatiently. And then with his eyes still lost in the distance and not looking at me, he asked, "Who is your God?"

Until he put this question he had been speaking quietly and affectionately, and I had found it pleasant to listen to him; like all thinking people he was a little sad and this had brought him close to me. I felt that I understood him and my embarrassment had begun to evaporate. And now suddenly he posed this crucial question which any man of our time, if he is honest with himself, finds it so difficult to answer. Who was my God? If only I knew that!

I was defeated by this question. Who wouldn't have been? Who else in my position would have preserved his presence of mind? He looked at me with his sharp eyes, smiled and waited for my answer.

"You are silent too long for a man who has any capacity to answer. Perhaps you will be able to tell me something if I put the question this way; you are a writer and thousands of people read you; what message are you trying to impart? And have you ever considered whether you have any right to teach?"

Never had I been forced to look so closely into the inner workings of my mind. Let no one think that I am exalting or humiliating myself in order to attract attention—it is no use asking a beggar for alms. I discovered in myself a fair measure of kind feelings and desires, a fair measure of what is usually called good, but what I could not find in myself was the feeling that would unite all this, the clear and well-shaped thought that would encompass all the phenomena of life. In my soul there was much hatred; it was constantly smouldering there and sometimes burst out in the clear flame of anger; but my soul harboured even more doubts. Sometimes they were such a burden to mind and heart that I languished in a state of total inner exhaustion.... Nothing could bring me back to life, my heart was as cold as a dead man's,my mind slept, my imagination was haunted by nightmares. And in this state, blind, deaf and dumb, I lived for days and nights on end, desiring nothing and understanding nothing; at such times I felt like a corpse that for some strange reason had not been buried. The horror of such an existence was intensified by awareness of the need to live for in death there was even less meaning and even more obscurity.... It probably took away even the luxury of hating.

Then what, in fact, was my message? What did I claim to teach? I as I really was. And what had I to say to people? The things people had been told long ago, that they had always been told? Things that induced people to listen but made them no better? But what right had I to teach these ideas and concepts if I, who was brought up on them, often acted contrary to their command? And if I could act thus was my belief in them a sincere belief, firmly implanted in the foundations of my own true "self"? What could

I tell this man who was sitting beside me? But he had grown tired of waiting for my answer and was talking again

"I should not put these questions to you if I could not see that ambition has not yet destroyed your honour You have the courage to listen to me From this I conclude that your self love is rational because you do not shrink even from the torture of fortifying it For that I will relieve the agony of your confrontation with me and speak to you as to one who has erred, but not as to a criminal

"At one time there lived among us great men of letters, subtle observers of life and the human soul, people inspired with an implacable urge to perfect life inspired with a deep faith in man They wrote books that will never be consigned to oblivion because they contain eternal truths, and beauty everlasting shines from their pages Their images are alive, animated by the power of inspiration In these books there is both courage and a blazing anger, they ring with sincere and unforced love, and there is not a single superfluous word in them It was these books, I know, that nourished your soul But even so, I must assume, your soul remained poorly nourished because what you write about truth and love sounds false and pretentious, as though you were forcing yourself to say it. You are like the moon, you shine with a reflected light, and your light is pitifully dull, it proliferates shadows and its feeble radiance warms no one You are too poor to give people anything of true value, and what you do give you give not for the supreme delight of enriching life with the beauty of thought and word, but rather for the purpose of elevating the accidental fact of your existence to the status of a phenomenon necessary to man You give in order to take more from life and people You are too poor to make presents, you are a mere money lender you give a fraction of your experience on interest that has to be paid in attention to your own self Your pen barely scratches at reality, it cautiously stirs the trivia of life and in describing the commonplace feelings of commonplace people you may, perhaps, also reveal to them

many inferior truths But can you create for them even a small illusion that elevates the soul? No! You are confident that it is useful to dig in the rubbish of the commonplace and find in it nothing more than sad little truths which prove only that man is evil by nature, obtuse and dishonest, that he always and in every way depends on a mass of external circumstances, that he is impotent and wretched and isolated in his loneliness? And by this time, you know, he has probably become convinced of this! Because his soul is indifferent and his mind is dull And what else could it be! He looks at the way he is portrayed in books which par ticularly if they are written with the skill that is so often mistaken for talent always have rather a hypnotic effect A person sees himself as you portray him and, having been shown how bad he is, cannot see any possibility of becoming better Can you show him that possibility? Can you achieve that, when you yourself but I will spare you because while listening to me you have, I feel, not been thinking of how to justify yourself and refute what I have said A teacher, if he is honest, must always be an attentive pupil All you teachers of today, take far more from people than you give them because you keep talking only of what is lacking, which is all you see But man must also have his merits, surely you have some yourselves? And you, how do you differ from the ordinary, commonplace folk that you portray so ruthlessly and meticulously, considering yourselves teachers, denouncers of vice for the sake of the triumph of virtue? But have you noticed that the vices and the virtues thanks to your attempts to define them have only become more entang led, like two balls of thread, white and black, which in their proximity have rubbed off some of their original colour on each other and become grey? No, you are no God sent creatures He would have chosen someone stronger than you He would have infused their hearts with a passionate love of life, of truth, of people, that they might blaze in our darkness as luminaries of his power and glory But you burn smokily like the torches of Satan's triumph, and your fumes have eaten into people's minds and souls and are

poisoning them with the venom of self distrust So tell me what do you preach?"

I felt the man's hot breath on my cheek and kept my eyes averted for fear of meeting his glance His words were burning into my brain like drops of fire and I was in agony I realised with horror how difficult it was to answer his simple questions And I made no reply

"So I, the zealous reader of all that you and others like you have written, ask for what purpose do you write? And you write a lot Do you wish to awaken kindly feelings in people's hearts? No, you will never do that with cold and impotent words! And not only can you not give life anything new, you present even the old in a twisted, crumpled, shapeless form When reading you, we learn nothing and are ashamed of nothing, except of you It is all commonplace commonplace people, commonplace thoughts, events When will someone speak of the troubled soul of man and the need for its regeneration? Where is the call to create? Where are the lessons in courage? Where are the words of hope that uplift the soul?

"You may retort that life provides no other images than those that you reproduce But say it not, because it is a shame and disgrace for a man who has the good fortune to possess the gift of words to confess himself impotent in the face of life and incapable of rising above it And if you stand only on the same level as life, if you cannot by the force of your imagination create forms that life does not as yet possess but that are needed for its instruction, what is the use of your work and how can you justify your calling? Consider what harm you may do people by cluttering their minds with the rubbish of photographs of their uneventful lives For you must acknowledge yourselves incapable of portraying things so that your picture of life would evoke a vengeful shame and an ardent desire to create other forms of existence Can you quicken the pulse of life? Can you inspire it with energy as others have done?"

My strange companion paused for a moment and I pondered his words in silence.

"I see around me many intelligent people but few among them of noble mind, and those who possess such feelings are broken and sick at heart. And I always notice that for some reason the better a man is, the purer and more honest his soul, the less energy he has, and the more painful and difficult it is for him to live. The lot of such people is loneliness and grief. No matter how much they yearn for something better, they have no strength to create it. Are they not so crushed and pitiful because they have not been given the timely help of an uplifting word?"

"And what is more," my strange companion continued, "can you evoke a joyous laughter that cleanses the soul? Look around you! People have forgotten how to laugh well! They laugh bitterly, they laugh with malice, they often laugh through tears, but never among them do you hear a joyful, sincere laughter, the laughter that should often come from grown men because good laughter restores the soul to health.... A man must be able to laugh because laughter is one of the few advantages he has over the animals. Can you evoke in people any laughter other than the laughter of censure, the mean-spirited laughter at you, man, who is only funny because he is wretched? Try to understand that your right to teach must have sufficient grounds in your ability to awaken sincere feelings, feelings with the drive and power to destroy some forms of life in order to create other, freer forms in their stead. Anger, hatred, courage, shame, revulsion or a fierce desperation—these are the levers with which everything on earth can be destroyed. Can you create such levers? Can you set them in motion? In order to have the right to speak to the people, you must have in your heart either a great hatred of their shortcomings or a great love for them in their sufferings; if there are no such feelings in your heart, be modest enough to think again before you say anything...."

Day was breaking but in my soul there was an ever

growing darkness And the man for whom it held no secrets went on talking Sometimes the thought struck me, "Is he human?"

But I was so engrossed in what he was saying that I had no time to ponder upon this riddle before his words struck again like needles into my brain

"All the same life is becoming richer, reaching out to new frontiers, striking deeper, although the process is slow because we have neither the strength nor the skill to accelerate it Yes, life is growing richer and every day people are learning to ask questions Who is going to provide the answers? It ought to be you, you self appointed apostles But do you understand life well enough to explain it to others? Do you understand the demands of our age? Have you the ability to perceive what the future holds? And what can you say to awaken the person who has been corrupted by the squalor of life, who is broken and dispirited? Man is dispirited, he has little interest in life, his desire to live with dignity is almost used up He wants to live simply, like a pig and do you hear? he laughs arrogantly when confronted with the word 'ideal', man is turning into a heap of bones covered with flesh and a thick skin, and this vile heap is moved not by the spirit but by lust. He needs attention Make haste! Help him to live while he is still a human being! But what can you do to awaken his desire to live when you only moan, groan and sigh, or with cold indifference describe his disintegration? Life reeks of decay, hearts are saturated with cowardice and servility, minds and hands are bound with the soft bonds of sloth What can you inject into this chaos of corruption? How petty, how wretched you are? And how many there are of you! Oh, if only there would appear a stern and loving man with a blazing heart and a powerful all-embracing mind! The stifling atmosphere of shameful silence would resound with portentous words, ringing out like bell notes, and then perhaps the contemptible souls of the living dead would be shaken into action "

After these words he fell into a long silence I did not

look at him I cannot remember now which I felt more shame or horror

"What have you to say to me?" came the impartial question

"Nothing!" I replied

And again there was silence

"Then how will you live now?"

"I don't know!" I answered

"What will you say?"

I held my peace

"There is no wisdom higher than silence!"

The pause between these words and the laughter that followed was agonising He laughed with the delight of a man who for a long time had not had the opportunity to laugh so light heartedly and pleasantly But that accursed laughter made my heart bleed

"Ha, ha! And you are supposed to be one of life's teachers? You whom it is so easy to reduce to confusion? Ha, ha, ha . And every one of you, young men who were born old, would be equally confused if he consented to have anything to do with me Only he who has clad himself in the armour of lies, arrogance and shamelessness can remain unmoved before the judgement of his conscience So that's how strong you are a single push and you fall! Say something tell me something to justify yourself, refute what I have said! Relieve your heart of shame and remorse Show some strength and confidence in yourself, if only for a minute, and I will take back the words I have thrown in your face I will bow before you Show me that there is something in your heart that would help me to acknowledge you as a teacher! I need a teacher because I am a human being, I have lost my way in life's darkness and I am seeking a way out to the light, to the truth, to beauty, to a new life show me the way! I am a human being Hate me, beat me, but drag me out of the slime of my indifference to life! I want to be better than I am, how can that be done? Teach me how!"

I thought Can I, can I satisfy the demands that this man

quite rightfully makes of me? Life is petering out, people's minds are infested by an increasing horde of doubts and a way out must be found. Where is it? The only thing I know is that happiness is not the thing one must strive for. Why strive for happiness? The meaning of life does not lie there and man will never be satisfied by complacence; at least he is above that. The meaning of life lies in the beauty and strength of achievement, and every moment of our existence must have its lofty goal. That would be possible, but not within the old boundaries of life, which are so narrow for everyone and within which there is no freedom for the human spirit....

He was laughing again, but softly now; it was the laughter of a man whose heart was being eaten into by thoughts.

"How many people have lived on earth, and yet how few have left anything for us to remember them by! Why is this so? Still, let us renounce the past—it excites too much envy. At the present time there is no one who could leave any trace on earth after his death. Man is lost in slumber.... And no one seeks to waken him. He sleeps and turns into an animal. The whip is what he needs and the fiery caress of love after the laying on of the lash. Don't be afraid of hurting him; if you strike with love he will understand your blow and take it as what he deserves. And when he is writhing with agony and shame of himself, you must lavish ardent caresses upon him and he will be reborn.... People? They are still children, although at times they astonish us with the wickedness of their deeds and the pervertedness of their thoughts. And they are always in need of love, of constant efforts to provide them with fresh and wholesome food for their souls.... Can you love people?"

"Love people?" I repeated doubtfully, for truly I did not know whether I did love them. And now I had to be sincere—no, I did not know. Who could say of himself: I love people. Any man who observed himself keenly would think hard before answering yes to that question. We all know how far from each of us are our own kith and kin.

"You are silent? But I understand you, even though you have nothing to say.... And now I shall leave you."

"Already?" I asked quietly because, afraid though I was of him, I was even more afraid of myself.

"Yes, I shall leave you now.... But I shall come again and not once. Wait!"

And he left.

How did he leave? I did not see him. He disappeared quickly and soundlessly, like a shadow.... I remained sitting on the park bench for a long time, heedless of the cold and of the fact that the sun had risen and was shining brightly on the icy branches of the trees. It was strange for me to see this clear day and the sun shining indifferently as usual, and this old tormented earth in its blanket of snow glittering unbearably bright in the sun's rays.

1898

Twenty-Six Men and a Girl

We were twenty-six men, twenty-six living machines boxed up in a dark hole of a basement, where from morn till night we kneaded dough, making pretzels and cracknels. The windows of our basement looked out on a hole lined with bricks that were green with slime. The windows, on the outside, were closely grated, and no ray of sunshine could reach us through the panes, which were plastered with meal. Our boss had fenced off the windows to prevent any of his bread from going to beggars or to those of our mates who were out of work and starving—our boss called us a bunch of crooks and gave us tainted tripe for dinner instead of meat.

Life was stuffy in that crowded dungeon, beneath a low-hanging ceiling covered with soot and cobwebs. Life was hard and sickening within those thick walls smudged with dirt stains and mildew. We got up at five in the morning, our heads heavy from not enough sleep, and at six, dull and listless, we sat down at the table to make pretzels and cracknels out of the dough which our mates had prepared while we were sleeping. And the livelong day, from early morning till ten at night, some of us sat at the table shaping the stiff dough and swaying our bodies to fight numbness, while others were mixing flour and water. And all day long the simmering water in the cauldron where the pretzels were cooking gurgled drearily and sadly, and the baker's shovel clattered angrily and swiftly on the hearthstone as it flung slippery cooked pieces of dough onto the hot bricks. From morning till night the wood burned in the oven, and the ruddy glow of the flames flickered on the bakery walls, as though in silent mockery. The huge oven resembled the ugly head of some fantastic monster thrust up from under

the floor, its gaping jaws ablaze with glowing fire, breathing heat at us, and watching our ceaseless toil through two sunken air holes over its forehead These two hollows were like eyes the pitiless impassive eyes of a monster, they stared at us balefully, as though weary with looking at slaves of whom nothing human could be expected, and whom they despised with the cold contempt of superior wisdom

Day in, day out, amid the meal dust and the grime which we brought in on our feet from the yard, in the smelly stuffiness of the hot basement, we kneaded dough and shaped pretzels, which were sprinkled with our sweat, and we hated our work with a fierce hatred, and never ate what our hands had made, preferring black rye bread to pretzels Sitting at a long table facing one another nine men on each side we worked our hands and fingers mechanically through the long hours, and had grown so accustomed to our work that we no longer watched our movements And we had grown so accustomed to one another that each of us knew every furrow on his mates' faces We had nothing to talk about, we were used to that, and were silent all the time unless we swore, for there is always something one can swear at a man for, especially one's mate But we seldom swore at each other is a man to blame if he is half-dead, if he is like a stone image, if all his senses are blunted by the crushing burden of toil? Silence is awful and irksome only to those who have said all there is to say, but to people whose words are still unspoken, silence is natural and easy Sometimes we sang, and this is how our song would start during the work somebody would suddenly heave a sigh, like a weary horse, and begin softly to sing one of those long-drawn songs whose mournful tender melody always lightens the heavy burden of the singer's heart One of the men would sing while the rest listened in silence to the lonely song, and it would flag and fade away beneath the oppressive basement ceiling like the dying flames of a camp-fire in the steppe on a wet autumn night, when the grey sky overhangs the earth like a roof of lead Then another singer would join the first, and the two voices would

float drearily and softly in the stuffy heat of our crowded pen. Then suddenly, several voices at once would join in—and the song would be lashed up like a wave, growing stronger and louder, and seeming to break down the dank, heavy walls of our prison.

Now all twenty-six would be singing; loud voices, brought to harmony by long practice, fill the workshop; the song is cramped for space; it buffets the stone walls, moaning and weeping, and stirs the heart with a gentle prickly pain, reopening old wounds and wakening anguish in the soul. The singers draw deep heavy sighs; one will suddenly break off and sit listening for a long time to his mates, then his voice will mingle again with the general chorus. Another will cry out dismally, "Ah!", singing with closed eyes, and maybe he sees the broad torrent of sound as a road running far out, a wide road bathed in brilliant sunshine and he himself walking along it....

The flames in the oven still flicker, the baker's shovel still scrapes on the brick, the water in the cauldron still bubbles and gurgles, the firelight on the wall still quivers in silent laughter. And we chant out, through words which are not our own, the dull ache within us, the gnawing grief of living men deprived of the sun, the grief of slaves. And so we lived, twenty-six men, in the basement of a big stone building, and the burden of life was so heavy that one would think the three storeys of the house were built on our shoulders.

Apart from our songs there was something else that we loved and cherished, something that perhaps filled the place of the sun for us. On the first floor of our building there was a gold embroidery workshop, and there, among many girl hands, lived sixteen-year-old Tanya, a housemaid. Every morning a pink face with blue merry eyes would be pressed to the pane of the little window cut into the door of our workshop, and a sweet ringing voice would call out to us:

"Hullo, jail-birdies! Give us some pretzels!"

We would all turn our heads to the sound of that clear voice and look kindly and joyfully at the pure girlish face

that smiled at us so sweetly. We loved to see the nose flattened against the glass, the little white teeth glistening from under rosy lips parted in a smile. We would rush to open the door for her, jostling one another, and there she would be, so chirpy and charming, holding out her apron, standing before us with her head cocked and face radiant. A thick long braid of chestnut hair hung over her shoulder on her breast. Grimy, coarse, ugly men, we looked up at her—the threshold rose four steps above the floor—looked up at her with raised heads and wished her good morning, and our words of greeting were special words, found only for her. When we spoke to her our voices were softer, our joking lighter. Everything we had for her was special. The baker drew out of the oven a shovelful of the crustiest browned pretzels and shot them adroitly into Tanya's apron.

"Mind the boss doesn't catch you!" we would warn her. She laughed roguishly and cried merrily:

"Bye-bye, jail-birdies!" and would vanish in a twinkling like a little mouse.

And that would be all.... But long after she had gone we talked about her—we said the same things we had said yesterday and the day before, because she, and we, and everything around us were the same they had been yesterday and the day before. It is very painful and hard for a man to live and have nothing change around him. If it doesn't kill the soul in him, the longer he lives the more painful does the immobility of things surrounding him become. We always talked about women in a way that sometimes made us feel disgusted with ourselves and with our coarse shameless talk. That is not surprising, since the women we knew probably did not deserve to be talked about in any other way. But about Tanya we never said a bad word. None of us ever dared to touch her with his hand and she never heard a loose joke from any of us. Perhaps it was because she never stayed long—she would flash before our gaze like a star falling from the heavens and vanish. Or perhaps because she was small and so very beautiful, and everything that is beautiful inspires respect, even with rough

men. Moreover, though drudgery was turning us into dumb oxen, we were still human beings, and like all human beings, could not live without an object of worship. Finer than she there was nobody about us, and nobody else took notice of us, men living in the basement, though there were dozens of tenants in the house. And finally—probably this was the main reason—we regarded her as something that belonged to us, something that owed its existence to our pretzels. We made it our duty to give her hot pretzels, and this became our daily sacrifice to the idol, almost a sacred rite, that endeared her to us more and more every day. Besides pretzels, we gave Tanya a good deal of advice—to dress warmly, not to run too fast up the stairs, not to carry heavy bundles of firewood. She listened to our counsels with a smile, retorted with a laugh and never obeyed them, but we did not take offence—we were content to show our solicitude for her.

Often she asked us to do things for her. For example, she would ask us to open a refractory door in the cellar or chop some wood, and we would do these things for her and anything else she asked gladly, with a peculiar pride.

But when one of us asked her to mend his only shirt, she sniffed scornfully and said, "The idea! Not likely!"

We had a good laugh at the silly fellow's expense, and never again asked her to do anything. We loved her—and there all is said. A man always wants to foist his love on somebody or other, though it frequently oppresses, sometimes sullies, and may even poison the life of a fellow creature, for in loving he does not respect the object of his love. We had to love Tanya, for there was no one else we could love.

At times one of us would suddenly start arguing: "What's the idea, making such a fuss over the kid? What's there so wonderful about her anyway?"

We'd brusquely silence the fellow who spoke like that—we had to have something we could love; we had found it, and loved it, and what we twenty-six loved went for

each of us, it was our holy of holies, and anybody who went against us in this was our enemy. We loved, perhaps, what was not really good, but then there were twenty-six of us, and we therefore wanted the object of our adoration to be held sacred by others.

Our love is no less onerous than hate ... and that, perhaps, is why some stiff-necked people claim that our hate is more flattering than love. But why do they not shun us if that is so?

Besides the pretzel bakery our boss had a bun bakery. It was situated in the same building, and only a wall divided it from our hole. The bun bakers, of whom there were four, held themselves aloof from us, however. They considered their work to be cleaner than ours, and themselves, therefore, better men; they never visited our workshop, and treated us with mocking scorn whenever they ran into us in the yard. We did not visit them either—the boss banned such visits for fear that we would steal buns. We hated the bun bakers, because we envied them—their work was easier than ours, they got better pay, they were fed better, they had a roomy airy workshop, and they were all so clean and healthy, and therefore so odious. We, on the other hand, were all a yellow grey-faced lot; three of us were ill with syphilis, some were scabby and one was crippled by rheumatism. On holidays and Sundays they used to dress up in suits and creaky high boots, two of them possessed accordions, and all used to go out for a stroll in the park, while we were clothed in filthy tatters, with rags or bast shoes on our feet, and the police wouldn't let us into the park—now, could we love those bun bakers?

One day we learned that their head baker had taken to drink, that the boss had fired him and taken on another man in his place, and that the new man was an ex-soldier who went about in a satin waistcoat and owned a watch on a gold chain. We were curious to have a look at that dandy, and kept running out into the yard one after another in the hope of seeing him.

But he came to our workshop himself. Kicking open the door, he stood in the doorway, smiling, and said to us:

"Hullo! How do you do, boys!"

The frosty air rushing through the door in a smoky cloud eddied around his feet, while he stood in the doorway looking down at us, his large yellow teeth glinting from under his fair swaggering moustache. His waistcoat was indeed unique—a blue affair, embroidered with flowers, and all glittering, with buttons made from some kind of red stone. The chain was there too.

He was a handsome fellow, was that soldier—tall, strong, with ruddy cheeks and big light-coloured eyes that had a nice look in them—a kind, clean look. On his head he wore a white stiffly starched cap, and from under an immaculately straight apron peeped the pointed toes of a highly polished pair of fashionable shoes.

Our head baker asked him politely to close the door. He complied unhurriedly and began questioning us about the boss. We fell over each other to tell him that the boss was a skinflint, a crook, a scoundrel and a tormentor—the things we told him about the boss couldn't possibly be put in writing here. The soldier listened, twitching his moustache and regarding us with that clear, gentle look of his.

"You've a lot of girls around here," he suddenly said.

Some of us laughed politely, others pulled sugary faces, and someone informed the soldier that there were nice bits of fluff about the place.

"Use 'em?" asked the soldier with a knowing wink.

Again we laughed, a rather subdued, embarrassed laugh. Many of us would have liked to make the soldier believe they were as gay sparks as he was, but they couldn't do it. None of us could. Somebody confessed as much, saying quietly:

"Them's not for us..."

"N'yes, you're miles out of it," the soldier said with conviction, looking us over narrowly. "You're *not*—er—up to the mark.... Ain't got the character ... the right stuff, you know, the looks. Looks is what a woman likes about a man.

Give her a regular body ... everything just so. And then, of course, she likes a bit o' muscle. Likes an arm to be an arm, this kind o' stuff."

The soldier pulled his right hand out of his pocket with the sleeve rolled back to the elbow, and held it up for us to see. He had a strong white arm covered with shining golden hairs.

"The leg, chest, everything must be firm. And then a man's got to be dressed right, well turned out, you know. Take me now—the women just fall over themselves. Mind you, I don't go after them or tempt 'em—they just hang round my neck five at a time."

He sat down on a sack of flour and told us at great length how the women loved him and how dashingly he treated them. Then he took his leave, and when the door closed behind him with a squeak, we sat there in a long silence, musing on him and his stories. Then suddenly everybody spoke up at once, and it transpired that we had all taken a liking to him. Such a nice, simple fellow, the way he had come in, sat down, and chatted. Nobody ever came to see us, nobody talked to us like that, friendly like. And we kept on talking about him and his future success with the seamstresses, who, on meeting us in the yard, either steered clear of us with a grimace of distaste, or bore straight down on us as if we were not there at all. And we only admired them, in the yard or when they passed our window, wearing their cute little hats and fur coats in the winter, and flowery hats with bright-coloured parasols in the summer. Among ourselves, however, we talked about these girls in a way that, had they heard us, would have made them mad with shame and indignation.

"I hope he doesn't ... er, have a go at our Tanya," the head baker said suddenly in a tone of anxiety.

We were all struck dumb by this statement. We had somehow forgotten about Tanya—the soldier had blotted her out, as it were, with his large handsome figure. A noisy argument broke out: some said that Tanya would have none of him, some asserted that she would be unable to resist the

soldier's charms, and others proposed to break the fellow's bones for him should he start making passes at Tanya Finally, all decided to keep a watch on the soldier and Tanya, and to warn the kid against him That put a stop to the argument

About a month passed The soldier baked buns, went out with the seamstresses, often dropped in to see us, but never said anything about his conquests all he did was to twirl his moustache and lick his chops

Tanya came every morning for her pretzels and was as gay, sweet and gentle as ever We tried to broach the subject of the soldier with her she called him a "pop-eyed dummy" and other funny names, and that set our minds at rest We were proud of our little girl when we saw how the seamstresses clung to the soldier Tanya's attitude towards him bucked us all up, and under her influence, as it were, we ourselves began to treat him with scorn We loved her more than ever and greeted her more gladly and kindly in the mornings

One day, however, the soldier dropped in on us a little the worse for drink He sat down and started to laugh, and when we asked him what was tickling him, he said

"Two of 'em have had a fight over me Lida and Grusha The things they did to each other! It was a real scream, ha ha! One of 'em grabbed the other by the hair, dragged her into the passage all over the floor, and then got on top of her Ha ha ha! Scratched each other's mugs, tore their clothes Did I laugh! Why can't these females have a straight fight? Why do they scratch, eh?"

He sat on a bench, looking so clean, healthy and cheerful, laughing without a stop We said nothing Somehow he was odious to us this time

"Why am I such a lucky devil with the girls? It's a scream! Why I just give a wink and the trick's done!"

He raised his white hands covered with shining hairs and brought them down on his knees with a slap He surveyed us with a look of pleased surprise, as though himself genuinely

astonished at the good luck he enjoyed with the ladies His plump ruddy face shone with smug pleasure and he kept passing his tongue over his lips

Our head baker angrily rattled his shovel on the hearth and suddenly said sarcastically

"It's no great fun felling little fir trees I'd like to see what you'd do with a pine!"

"Eh, what? Were you talking to me?" the soldier queried

"Yes, you "

"What did you say?"

"Never mind Let it lay "

"Here, hold on! What's it all about? What d'you mean pine?"

Our baker did not reply His shovel moved swiftly in the oven, tossing in boiled pretzels and shooting the baked ones onto the floor, where boys sat threading them on bast strings. He seemed to have forgotten the soldier But the latter suddenly got all worked up He rose to his feet and stepped up to the oven, exposing himself to the imminent danger of being struck in the chest by the shovel handle, which whisked spasmodically in the air

"Look here what d'you mean? That's an insult Why, there isn't a girl that could resist me! No, sir! And here are you, letting out hints against me "

Indeed, he appeared to be genuinely offended Evident ly the sole source of his self respect was his ability to seduce women, this ability, perhaps, was the only human attribute he could boast, the only thing that made him feel a human being

There are people for whom the main thing in life is some sickness of the soul or the flesh It fills all their lives, it is what they live for While suffering from it, they nourish themselves on it. They complain to people about it, and in this manner command the interest of their fellow creatures They exact a toll of sympathy from people, and this is the only thing in life they have Deprive them of that sickness, cure them of it, and they will be utterly miserable, because

they will lose the sole sustenance of their life and become empty husks. Sometimes a man's life is so poor that he is perforce obliged to cultivate a vice and thrive on it. One might say that people are often addicted to vice through sheer boredom.

The soldier was stung to the quick. He bore down on our baker, whining:

"No, you tell me—who is it?"

"Want me to tell you?" the baker said, turning on him suddenly.

"Yes!"

"Do you know Tanya?"

"Well?"

"Well, there you are! See what you can do there."

"Me?"

"Yes, you."

"Her? Easy as pie!"

"We'll see!"

"You'll see! Ha-a!"

"Why, she'll—"

"It won't take a month!"

"You're cocky, soldier, aren't you?"

"A fortnight! I'll show you! Who did you say? Tanya? Pshaw!"

"Come on, get out. You're in the way!"

"A fortnight, and the trick's done! Ugh, you!"

"Get out!"

The baker flew into a sudden rage and brandished his shovel. The soldier recoiled in amazement, then regarded us all for a while in silence, muttered grimly "All right!" and went out.

We had listened to this contest in silence, deeply interested. But when the soldier left we all broke out into loud and excited argument.

Somebody cried out to the baker:

"That's a bad business you've started, Pavel!"

"Get on with your work!" snapped the baker.

We realised that the soldier's vanity had been wounded

and that Tanya was in danger. And yet, while aware of this, we were all seized with a burning pleasurable curiosity as to what would be the outcome of it all. Would Tanya hold her own against the soldier? We voiced the conviction almost unanimously:

"Tanya? She'll hold her ground! She isn't easy game, not her!"

We were terribly keen on putting our idol to the test. We tried our hardest to convince each other that our idol was a staunch idol and would stand up to this test. We even started wondering whether we had goaded the soldier sufficiently, fearing that he would forget the wager and that we would have to give some more pricks to his conceit. From now on, a new exciting interest had been added to our lives, something we had never known before. We argued among ourselves for days on end; somehow, we all seemed to have grown cleverer, we spoke better and more. It was as if we were playing a game with the devil, the stake on our side being Tanya. And when we learned from the bun bakers that their soldier had "made a dead set for Tanya", our excitement rose to fever pitch and life became such a thrilling experience that we did not even notice how the boss had taken advantage of this to throw in an extra fourteen poods of dough daily. We didn't even seem to tire of the work. Tanya's name was on our lips all day long. We looked forward to her morning visits with a peculiar impatience. At times we fancied that when she came in to see us it would be a different Tanya, not the one we had always known.

We told her nothing about the wager, though.

We never asked her any questions and treated her in the same good-natured affectionate manner. But something new had crept into our attitude, something that was alien to our former feelings for Tanya—and that new element was keen curiosity, keen and cold as a blade of steel.

"Boys! Time's up today!" the baker said one morning as he began work.

We were well aware of it without being reminded. Yet we all started.

"You watch her She'll soon come in," the baker suggested Someone exclaimed ruefully

"It's not a thing the eye can catch " .

And again a noisy lively argument sprang up Today, at length, we would know how clean and incontaminate was the vessel to which we had trusted all the best that was in us That morning it dawned on us for the first time that we were gambling for high stakes, that this test of our idol might destroy it for us altogether All these days we had been hearing that the soldier had been doggedly pursuing Tanya with his attentions, but for some reason none of us asked her what she thought about him She continued regularly to call on us every morning for her pretzels and was always her usual self

That day, too, we soon heard her voice

"Hullo, jail birdies! I've come "

We hastened to let her in, and when she came in we greeted her, contrary to custom, with silence We looked hard at her and were at a loss what to say to her, what to ask her We stood before her, a silent sullen crowd She was obviously surprised at the unusual reception, and suddenly we saw her turn pale and look disturbed In a choky voice she asked

"Why are you all so strange?"

"What about yourself?" the baker said in a grim tone, his eyes fixed on her face

"What about me?"

"Nothing "

"Well, give me the pretzels, quick "

Never before had she shown any signs of hurry

"Plenty of time," the baker retorted without stirring, his eyes still glued on her face

Abruptly she turned and disappeared through the door

The baker picked up his shovel, and turning to the oven, let fall calmly

"Well, she's fixed! He's done it, the blighter!"

We shambled back to the table like a herd of jostling

sheep, sat down and silently and apathetically set to our work Presently someone said

"Maybe she hasn't "

"Shut up! Enough of that!" the baker shouted

We all knew him for a clever man, cleverer than any of us And that shout of his told us that he was convinced of the soldier's victory We felt sad and perturbed

At twelve o'clock the lunch hour the soldier came in He was, as always, clean and spruce, and as al ways looked us straight in the face We felt too ill at ease to look at him

"Well, gentlemen, d'you want me to show you what a soldier can do?" he said with a proud sneer "You just go out into the passage and peep through the cracks. Get me?"

We trooped out into the passage, and falling over each other, pressed our faces to the chinks in the wooden wall looking onto the yard We did not have to wait long Presently Tanya crossed the yard with a hurried step and an anxious look, skipping over puddles of thawed snow and mud She disappeared through the door of the cellar After a while the soldier sauntered past whistling, and he, too, went in His hands were thrust into his pockets and he twitched his moustache

It was raining and we saw the drops falling into the puddles, which puckered up at the impact. It was a grey wet day a very bleak day Snow still lay on the roofs, while the ground was covered with dark patches of slush On the roofs, too, the snow was covered with a brownish coating of dirt. It was cold and uncomfortable, waiting in that passage

The first to come out of that cellar was the soldier He walked leisurely across the yard, twitching his moustache, his hands deep in his pockets much the same as usual

Then Tanya came out. Her eyes her eyes shone with joy and happiness, and her lips smiled And she walked as though in a dream, swaying, with unsteady gait

It was more than we could stand We all made a sudden dash for the door, burst into the yard and began yelling and whistling at her in a fierce, loud, savage uproar

She started when she saw us and stood stock still, her feet in a dirty puddle We surrounded her and cursed her with a sort of malicious glee, pouring out a torrent of profanity and obscene taunts

We did it unhurriedly, with lowered voices seeing that she had no means of escape from the circle around her, and that we could jeer at her to our heart's content Surprisingly enough we did not hit her She stood among us, turning her head from side to side, listening to our insults And we, more and more fiercely and furiously, flung at her the dirt and poison of our wrath

Her face drained of life Her blue eyes, which a moment before had looked so happy, were dilated, her breath came in gasps, and her lips quivered

And we, standing round her, were wreaking our vengeance upon her for had she not robbed us? She had belonged to us, we had spent our best feelings on her, and though that best was a mere beggar's pittance, we were twenty six and she was one, and there was no pain we could inflict that was fit to meet her guilt How we insulted her! She said not a word, but simply stared at us in sheer terror, trembling with all her body

We guffawed, we howled, we snarled Other people came up One of us pulled the sleeve of Tanya's blouse

Suddenly her eyes blazed She raised her hands in a slow gesture to straighten her hair, and said loudly but calmly, straight into our faces

"Oh, you miserable jail birds!"

And she bore straight down on us, just as if we had not been there, had not stood in her path Indeed, that is why none of us proved to be in her path

When she was clear of our circle she added just as loudly, without turning round, in a tone of scorn and pride

"Oh, you filthy swine. You beasts." And she departed—straight, beautiful and proud.

We were left standing in the middle of the yard amid the mud, under the rain and a grey sky that had no sun in it.

Then we, too, shuffled back to our damp stony dungeon. As of old, the sun never peered through our window, and Tanya came no more.

1899

Song of the Stormy Petrel

High above the silvery ocean winds are gathering the stormclouds, and between the clouds and ocean proudly wheels the Stormy Petrel, like a streak of sable lightning.

Now his wing the wave caresses, now he rises like an arrow, cleaving clouds and crying fiercely, while the clouds detect a rapture in the bird's courageous crying.

In that crying sounds a craving for the tempest! Sounds the flaming of his passion, of his anger, of his confidence in triumph.

The gulls are moaning in their terror—moaning, darting o'er the waters, and would gladly hide their horror in the inky depths of ocean.

And the grebes are also moaning. Not for them the nameless rapture of the struggle. They are frightened by the crashing of the thunder.

And the foolish penguins cower in the crevices of rocks, while alone the Stormy Petrel proudly wheels above the ocean, o'er the silver-frothing waters!

Ever lower, ever blacker, sink the storm-clouds to the sea, and the singing waves are mounting in their yearning towards the thunder.

Strikes the thunder. Now the waters fiercely battle with the winds. And the winds in fury seize them in unbreakable embrace, hurling down the emerald masses to be shattered on the cliffs.

Like a streak of sable lightning wheels and cries the Stormy Petrel, piercing stormclouds like an arrow, cutting swiftly through the waters.

He is coursing like a Demon, the black Demon of the tempest, ever laughing, ever sobbing—he is laughing at the stormclouds, he is sobbing with his rapture.

...ing of the thunder the wise Demon hears
murmur of exhaustion And he knows the storm will die an
the sun will be triumphant, sun will always be triumphant

The waters roar The thunder crashes Livid lightnin
flares in stormclouds high above the seething ocean, and th
flaming darts are captured and extinguished by the waters
while the serpentine reflections writhe, expiring, in the
deep

It's the storm! The storm is breaking!

Still the valiant Stormy Petrel proudly wheels among the
ightning, o'er the roaring, raging ocean, and his cry
esounds exultant, like a prophecy of triumph

Let it break in all its fury!

The Ice Is Moving

On the river opposite the town seven carpenters were hastily mending a starling from which, during the course of the winter, the inhabitants of the outlying settlements had stripped the planks for firewood

Spring was late that year young and lusty March had more than a look of October about him, only towards midday and not every day at that in a sky netted with pale light a white, wintry sun would appear and go diving in and out of the clear, blue patches between the clouds, squinting down upon the earth with scant favour

It was Good Friday already and in the night the thaw drops had frozen into blue icicles a foot long, the ice on the river, almost bare of snow, was a bluish colour too, like the wintry clouds

The carpenters worked on but in the town the copper bells were ringing a mournful summons The heads of the workers would come up and their eyes drown thoughtfully in the greyish dusk which wrapped the town, and often the axe raised for the next blow would pause indecisively in mid air as though fearing to cut across the caressing sound of the bells

Here and there over the wide strip of the river, pine branches were stuck crookedly into the ice to mark the road and any faults or cracks in the ice, they clawed upwards like the arms of a drowning man writhen with cramp

The river exhaled an aching melancholy deserted, covered with porous scabs, it lay like a straight road without hope or promise of comfort leading to some murky region from which, weakly and cheerlessly, a cold wind blew

The foreman Osip, a clean, well built little man with a tidy silver beard, neatly curling in tight rings on his rosy

cheeks and supple neck, always and everywhere in the limelight, the foreman Osip shouted

"Get a move on "

Turning to me, he added on a note of ironic exhortation

"Inspector, what are you poking that blunt nose of yours up into the sky for? What job was it you were wished onto us for, I'm asking you? You're from the contractor, Vassily Sergeyevich? In that case it's up to you to egg us on put your backs into it, you blankety blanks, you! That's the great task you've been allotted, and you're turning a blind eye on your duty, my lad, you rotted piece o' standing timber You've not the right to turn a blind eye, you ought to keep your eyes open and give the boys the rough side of your tongue if you've been sent to get work out of us Use your authority, you cuckoo's egg! "

Again he shouted at the lads

"Keep at it, you devils have we got to finish the work today, or haven't we? "

He himself was the greatest slacker in the artel He knew the work splendidly and knew how to work skilfully, speedily, with gusto and real interest, but he did not like to bestir himself and was always coming out with spell binding stories Just as the work had really got under way, when the men had become thoroughly absorbed and were working in silence, quite concentrated, suddenly inspired with the wish to do their work well and smoothly, Osip would pipe up in his liquid voice

"And you know, mates, it once happened "

For two or three minutes it would seem as though the men were not listening, selflessly continuing to hew, to plane, to wield their axes, but his soft, light tenor would flow dreamily on and gradually enmesh their attention Osip's clear, light blue eyes would narrow sweetly, he would twist his curly beard in his fingers and, smacking his lips with pleasure, string word upon word

"So he caught that tench, put it in his basket and went off through the forest thinking well, that'll make me a grand fish soup When, suddenly, there was no telling from

where, a woman's voice called out, small and shrill Yelesya a, Yelesya a "

By this time, the tall, raw boned Mordvinian Lyonka, nick named the Native a young fellow with small, be mused eyes had already lowered his axe and was standing still with his mouth open

"And out of the basket a rich bass voice answered Here-ere! And at that very moment the lid of the basket sprang open, the tench was out in one great leap and off and away, away back to his deep "

The old soldier Sanyavin, a dour drunkard who suffered from asthma and had apparently at some time undergone injury which had left him with a permanent grudge against life in general, put in hoarsely

"How was it that tench crossed over the dryland if he was a fish?"

"And is it so usual for a fish to talk?" Osip asked sweetly

Mokey Budyrin, a dull peasant with a face like a dog's the cheekbones and jawbones thrust forward, the forehead receding a silent and undistinguished person, unhurriedly enunciated through his nose his three favourite words

"You're right there "

Every time that anyone told of something wonderful, terrible, dirty or evil, he used to respond with this quiet but unshakably convinced

"You're right there "

And it was as though he had struck me three times under the heart with his cruel, heavy fist.

All work had come to a stop because Yakov Boyev, clumsy of tongue and bent of body, had also been visited by the urge to tell a fishy story and was already well under way, only no one would believe him and his awkward speech made them all laugh, he swore, he called on the Almighty to be his witness, he stabbed angrily at the air with his chisel and, spluttering spiteful saliva, shouted, to the amusement of all

"One telling such whoppers you wouldn't and they believe him, and here am I telling you God's truth and you laugh like jack asses, damn and blast you "

All the men left their work and joined in the general hubbub, waving their hands, at this point Osip took off his cap, baring his venerable silver head with the bald patch, and cried sternly

"That's enough, now! You've made your noise, you've had your rest and that'll do!"

"You started it," wheezed the soldier, spitting on his palms At moments like this Osip would turn to me

"Inspector r "

It seemed to me as though he had some specific aim in view when distracting the men's attention from their work with his yarns, but I could not make out whether it was that he intended to cloak his own laziness under this tongue-wagging or to give them a rest? Osip's attitude to the contractor was one of ingratiating servility, he "played the fool" for his benefit and, every Saturday, succeeded in extracting something "for a cup o'tea" for his artel

On the whole he was a good artel man, but the old hands disliked him, considering him a clown and a loafer and treating him with scant respect, and the young, too, though they enjoyed listening to his yarns, did not take him seriously and looked on him with ill-concealed, often resentful distrust

The Mordvinian, a literate lad with whom I sometimes had heart to-heart talks, when I asked him his opinion of Osip, answered with a grin

"Not know the devil, 'ee knows all right, I suppose not bad "

And added after due pause for thought

"Mikhailo who died was a sharp-tongued man, clever and once'ee had a quarrel with 'im, with Osip I mean, and 'ee say 'Do you think' 'ee say 'you are a real man? The worker in you 'as kicked the bucket and the boss 'as not been born, and so' 'ee says 'you'll be left dangling all your

life in a corner like a forgotten plummet on a string 'That, perhaps, was true enough "

But, after another pause for thought, the Mordvinian added uneasily

"But on the 'ole, 'ee's all right, a kind man "

My position amongst these men was ridiculous in the extreme at fifteen years of age I had been put in by the contractor to keep accounts of the expenditure of materials and to see that the carpenters did not steal the nails or trade in planks at the inn Nails they continued to steal, supremely unembarrassed by my presence, and all were eager to show me that I was a superfluous and unpleasant member of their company If any of them saw the opportunity to give me an unobtrusive bang with a plank or to cause me some other minor vexation they would take advantage of it very skilfully

I felt ill at-ease, ashamed, I wanted to say something which would reconcile them to me, but I could not find the right words and I was crushed by the dismal conviction of my own uselessness

Every time that I noted down the quantity of materials received in my book Osip would saunter across to me and enquire

"Done your drawing? Come along now, show us. "

He would look at the entry with narrowed eyes and say vaguely

"Small writing you've got "

He was only able to read printed letters and to write in ecclesiastical capitals[1] lay handwriting with joined up letters was beyond him

"That squiggle there what word is that?"

"Goods "

"Goo-oods! Looks more like a lasso to me And what's that line?"

"One and three-quarter inch planks twenty feet long five "

"Six "

"Five "

"How do you mean, five? The soldier there has sawn one in half "

"He shouldn't have done, there was no need "

"What do you mean, no need? He took half to trade in at the pub "

Looking serenely into my face with cornflour blue eyes in whose depths there lurked a malicious, merry sparkle, he twisted his beard into ringlets round and round his finger and said with irresistible shamelessness

"Put in six, do now! Just look, cuckoo's egg, it's such damp, cold, hard work people have to cheer themselves up every now and again, warm the heart with a little wine Don't you be too strict, you'll never get round God by being strict "

He spoke at length, caressingly, flowerily, the words sprinkling over me in a cloud like sawdust, and it was as though my conscience were blinded and, silently, I showed him the corrected figure

"There we are now that's right! And the figure looks better, too, sitting there like a merchant's wife, all plump and good hearted "

I saw how triumphantly he told the carpenters of his success, aware that they all despised me for yielding, my fifteen year-old heart weeping with the humiliation of it and dull, grey thoughts buzzing round and round in my head

"How strange and stupid all this is Why is he so sure that I will not change the 6 back to a 5 again and tell the contractor that they have sawn up one of the planks "

Once they stole two pounds of $4^{3}/_{4}$ inch wooden spikes and iron cramps

"Listen," I warned Osip "I can't let that by "

"All right," he agreed, his grey brows working "It really is going a bit far, isn't it? Go on, note them down, they're a bad bit "

And shouted to the men

"Hey, you bad lads, the spikes and cramps are being entered for a fine "

The soldier enquired gloomily

"Why for?"

You must have done something to deserve it," explained Osip calmly.

The carpenters began to grumble, giving me dirty looks, and I myself was not convinced that I would do what I had threatened and whether, if I did, it would be the right thing.

"I shall leave the contractor," I said to Osip. "To hell with you all! You'll make a thief out of me."

Osip thought for a moment, stroking his beard, sat down next to me shoulder to shoulder and said quietly:

"That's true!"

"What?"

"You should leave. What kind of an inspector do you think you are, what kind of an overseer? In jobs like that you have to understand the meaning of property, you have to have a watchdog nature in order to guard your master's belongings as you would your own skin, what your mother left you in her will.... And for a job like that—you're too young a whelp, you haven't the feel of property nor of what's owing to it. If anyone were to tell Vassily Sergeyevich how easy you are on us he'ld have you out on your ear that very moment without hesitation! Because you're not saving him money, you're losing him money, and an employee ought to bring his master profit. See?"

Rolling a cigarette, he handed it to me.

"Have a smoke, your brain'll clear. If you hadn't such a nosy, argumentative character I'd tell you to go and be a monk. But—your character isn't suited to that, it's a rough character, never been papered down and polished, why, you'ld even hold out against an abbot. A monk, now, he's like jackdaw: doesn't mind whose grain he's pecking, the roots of the matter are no business of his, he's full from the grain, not from the root. I'm telling you all this from the bottom of my heart, just to show you that you're not the sort of fellow to get mixed up in this sort of business, you're a cuckoo's egg dropped in the wrong nest."

He took off his cap—something he always did when he

wished to say anything particularly solemn, looked into the grey sky and said loudly, humbly

"In the eyes of the Lord we are thieves indeed and we may not look to Him for salvation "

"You're right there," Mokey Budyrin responded, his voice ringing like a clarionet

From that time on, silver haired, curly headed Osip of the clear eyes and the misty soul had acquired a pleasant kind of fascination for me, something resembling friendship had arisen between us, but I could see that for some reason his kindness to me embarrassed him, when the others were there he would pay no attention to me, his beady, cornflower blue eyes pale and empty, darting hither and thither, wavering, and his lip would curl, falsely, unpleasantly, when he came up to me and jeered

"Hey, keep your eyes open, earn your bread, just look over there the soldier's chewing nails, the hog "

When alone with me, though, he spoke like a gentle mentor, in his eyes would gleam a wise little sparkle of irony and he would direct their blue beams straight into my eyes. I lent an attentive ear to this man's words, they seemed to me to have truth in them, to have been honestly weighed in his mind, even though sometimes the things he said were strange

"To be a good man that's all that matters!" I once said

"Ah of course!" he agreed, but almost at once his lips twitched ironically and he lowered his eyes, saying quietly

"Only what do you mean by a good man? It seems to me that men don't care one way or another about your goodness or your fairness unless they happen to benefit from them, no, you show them attention, you be like a caress to every heart, you indulge people a little, comfort them maybe, at some time or another, you'll find it pays! Of course, there's no disputing that it's a mighty pleasant occupation, if you're a good man, to sit back and look at yourself in the mirror But other people believe me don't care whether you're a twister or a saint as long

as you keep an open heart and treat people kindly That's what they all want!"

I am very attentive in observing people, it seems to me that every person should help me and does help me to an understanding of this incomprehensible, confused, hurtful life and also I have my own gnawing, perpetual question which I ask everybody

"What is the soul of man?"

It seems to me that some souls are made like copper balls immutably fixed in the breast, they reflect everything which touches them from their own point of view only and the reflection is distorted, ugly and dull Other souls are flat and shallow, like mirrors, they might just as well not be there at all

The majority of human souls, however, seem to me to lack form altogether, like clouds, and to be shot with many dim colours, like that false stone, the opal, always ready to change submissively according to whatever colour domi nates in their immediate proximity

I did not know, could not make out of what kind was the soul of the venerable Osip it evaded me in its cleverness

It is of all this that I was thinking as I stared out over the river to where the town, clinging to the side of its hill, was pealing with the bells of all its belfries, rising skywards like the white pipes of my beloved organ in the Polish Catholic Church The crosses on the churches were like tarnished stars captive in the grey sky, flickering and trembling in their longing to rise above the grey veil of wind wracked clouds into the clean heavens, but the clouds kept drifting up and their shadows wiped out the bright colours of the town and every time a few rays of sunshine spilled out over the towns from the deep, pale blue openings in the clouds souring it in gay colours, the clouds would come swiftly up to cover the sun and their damp shadows would grow heavier and all the colours would fade, having merely whetted our appetites for a little gaiety

The houses of the town looked like heaps of dirty snow, the earth beneath them was black and bare, and the trees in

the gardens were like heaps of earth, the dull gleam of the windows in the grey walls was reminiscent of winter and all things were gently touched by the sadness of the pale northern spring

Mishuk Dyatlov, a fair haired young man with a harelip, broad and clumsy, made an effort to start a song

She came to him, but in the morning,
And he had died the night before

"Hey, you son-of a bitch" the soldier yelled at him "Have you forgotten what day it is today?"

Boyev, too, was angry, shook his fist at Dyatlov and hissed

"S-soul of a dog!"

"Where I came from the people are a forest people, long lived and tough in fibre," said Osip to Budyrin, straddling the starling and narrowing his eyes to calculate the slant "Shift the end of that beam an inch or two to the left so! Or, to put it more simply a wild people! Once, making the round of his diocese a bishop came to visit our parish and they ran to him, surrounded him, fell on their knees, and spilled out all their sorrows please, your Grace, say us a spell against wolves, the wolves are making life intolerable for us! Oy-oy-oy, how he cursed them Ah, you heathens, says he, call yourselves othodox Christians, do you, eh? Why, he says, I will have you up for heresy! Very wrathful, he was, even spat in their faces A little old man, a kindly soul, tears in his eyes "

Some forty yards downstream from the starling, sailors and vagrant odd jobbers were breaking the ice round a barge, the picks were crunching through the crumbling, blue grey skin of the river, the slender barge poles were waving in the air, driving the broken pieces of ice beneath the still unbroken surface, the water was welling up and the murmur of streams sounded from the sandy bank Where we were working there was a scraping of planes, a whistling of saws, a ringing of axes as they drove the iron cramps into the yellow, smoothly planed wood and all the sounds were

permeated by the pealing of the bells, softened by distance, disturbing the soul It was as though this grey day in all seriousness were joining in a service of invocation to the Spring, calling her back to the Earth, already free from snow but bare and destitute

Someone yelled in a hoarse voice

"Call the Ge-erman! They haven't enou-ough "

From the bank came the reply

"Where is he?"

"In the pub, go and loo-ook "

The voices floundered heavily in the damp air and drifted mournfully out over the wide river

The men were working hurriedly, with enthusiasm, but badly, carelessly, they all wanted to get into the town, to the steam baths and to church Particularly concerned was Sashok Dyatlov, as fair as his brother, as though he had been bleached, but curly headed, well made and nimble Every now and again he would glance up river and say quietly to his brother

"What d'you think, is it cracking?"

That night there had been a "shift" in the ice, the river police had not been allowing horses on the river since the morning, occasional pedestrians, strung out like beads along the lines of the crossing places, hurried from bank to bank, and you could hear the planks slapping juicily into the water as they bent beneath their weight.

"It is," answered Mishuk, blinking his white lashes

Osip, shading his eyes with his palm as he looked out over the river, broke in

"That's the shavings in your head drying out and creaking! Get on with your work, you witches' spawn! Inspector keep them at it, what've you buried your nose in your book for?"

There was no more than an hour or two's work left to do, the whole surface of the starling was already covered with butter yellow boarding and all that remained was to fix thick, iron binders. Boyev and Sanyavin had cut out furrows to receive them but they had miscalculated, the furrow was

too narrow and the strips of iron would not fit into the wood

"Blind idiots," cried Osip, clapping his hand to his cap "Do you call that work?"

Suddenly, from somewhere on the bank a joyful voice rang out

"It's moving Ahoy there!"

And as if in accompaniment to this shout an unhurried whisper, a quiet scraping sound flowed out over the river, the clawing arms of the pine way markers quivered as though trying to catch at something in the air above them and the sailors and their down and-out aids, waving their boathooks, clambered noisily up the rope ladders onto the deck of the barge

It was strange to see how many people were in fact out on the river They seemed to rise from beneath the ice itself and were now fluttering backwards and forwards like daws scared by a shot, running hither and thither, carrying planks and barge poles, throwing them down and picking them up again

"Collect your tools!" yelled Osip "Quickly, you Get ashore "

"There's Christ's Holy Resurrection for you!" exclaimed Sashok ruefully

It seemed as though the river remained as it had been and it was the town which had suddenly shuddered, wavered and, together with the hill beneath it, begun to float slowly upstream The grey shoals of sand about twenty metres in front of us also shifted suddenly and began to float away

"Run," shouted Osip, giving me a shove "What are you standing there gaping for?"

A thrill of danger passed through me, my legs, feeling the ice moving beneath them, began to spread out in great leaps as if of themselves and transported my body onto the sand amongst the naked shoots of the withies, all broken by the winter storms, where Boyev, the soldier, Budyrin and both Dyatlovs were already sprawling The Mordvinian was

running alongside me cursing angrily and Osip was coming up behind, shouting:

"Don't grouse, Native...."

"But, Uncle Osip...."

"The world hasn't come to an end!"

"We're stuck here for two or three days...."

"And you'll have a nice rest...."

"And Easter-day?"

"They'll celebrate Easter without you this year..

The soldier, sitting on the sand, lit his pipe and grunted;

"Panicked ... less than thirty metres from the shore and you all go bolting off as if your lives depended on it."

"You were the first to run," said Mokey.

But the soldier went on:

"And what were you so afraid of? Even the Lord Christ had to die...."

"All very well, but he rose again afterwards," muttered the Mordvinian surlily, but Boyev shouted him down:

"Shut your face, you puppy! What do you know of such matters? Rose again! It's Friday today, not Resurrection Sunday!"

From a blue cleft in the clouds the March sun suddenly blazed forth, the ice sparkled, laughing at us. Osip shaded his eyes with his palm, looked out over the deserted river and said:

"She's stopped.... But it won't be for long...."

"We're cut off from the celebrations," said Sashok glumly.

The beardless, moustacheless face of the Mordvinian, dark and knobby as an unskinned potato, crinkled up angrily, he blinked rapidly and grumbled:

"And here we are stranded.... Neither bread nor money.... Everyone rejoicing and we are serving Mammon, no better than dogs...."

Osip, without taking his eyes off the river, was obviously thinking of something and said now as if from far away:

"You're not serving Mammon at all, you're serving necessity! What are these breakers and starlings for? To

protect barges and all that from the ice. The ice is foolish, it'll come down and crush a whole convoy and—farewell to the goods...."

"But what's that to us. Not ours, are they?"

"Argue with a fool...."

"They should've mended it before...."

The soldier screwed up his face into a horrible grimace and shouted:

"Shut up, you bloody Native!"

"It's stopped," repeated Osip. "Uhu!"

On the line of barges the sailors were yelling and from the river emanated a breath of cold and a malevolent, vicious stillness. The pattern of the pine branches scattered over the ice had altered and everything appeared to have changed and to be laden with tense expectation.

One of the young lads asked quietly and nervously:

"Uncle Osip—what are we going to do?"

"What did you say?" he answered dreamily.

"Are we going to sit it out here?"

Boyev intoned maliciously through his nose:

"The Lord has seen fit to excommunicate you sinners from His Holy Ta-able."

The soldier backing up his comrade, made a decisive gesture with his hand towards the river and, with a grunt of laughter, muttered:

"Want to get to town? Go on! And the ice'll go too. If you're lucky you'll drown and, if you don't, the police'll get you and give you a nice holiday in jail—just the thing!"

"You're right there," said Mokey.

The sun hid behind a cloud, the river grew dark and the town became more clearly visible—the young people stared across at it with angry, aggrieved eyes and fell silent.

I felt dull and sick at heart, as one always does when one sees that all the people around one are pulling in different directions and that there is no singleness of purpose to unite people into a whole, stubborn force. I wanted to leave them and to stride off over the ice on my own.

Osip, as though he had just woken up, got to his feet, took off his cap, crossed himself in the direction of the town and said very simply, calmly and with authority:

"Come on, lads, and may God go with us...."

"To the town?" exclaimed Sashok, leaping up.

The soldier, without moving, announced with conviction:

"We'll drown!"

"Then—stay."

And, looking them all over, Osip shouted:

"Get a move on, lads, quickly now!"

They all rose and huddled together. Boyev, straightening out the tools in the basket, began grousing:

"He says 'Go!' and go it'll have to be! Let him who gives the orders take the responsibility...."

Osip seemed to have grown younger, stronger: the rather foxy, ingratiating expression had peeled off his rosy face, the eyes looked darker and were stern and businesslike; the lazy, shambling walk had also vanished—his stride had become firm and assured.

"Every man will take a plank and balance it across his body just in case—God forbid—anyone should fall in, the edges of the plank will fall on the ice and give support! And to help cross the cracks.... Rope—is there any? Native, give me the measuring rod.... Ready? Good—I'll go on in front, and behind me—who's the heaviest? You, soldier! Then—Mokey, the Mordvinian, Boyev, Mishuk, Sashok. Maksimych is the lightest, he can come behind.... Off with your caps, pray to the Holy Virgin! And here's good Master Sun come out to meet us...."

With one accord the unkempt grey and brown heads were bared, the sun shone out on them through a fine mesh of cloud and hid itself again, as though not wishing to raise false hopes.

"Come now," Osip said in a new, dry voice. "God go with us! Watch my feet, don't crowd up behind one another, keep intervals of some two yards, the further the better! Come on, children!"

Thrusting his cap into his jacket and holding the measuring rod in one hand, Osip glided cautiously off onto the ice with a curious, caressing shuffle and immediately on the bank behind us sounded a desperate cry

"Where do you think you're going, you bloody fools "

"Keep walking, don't look back!" our leader ordered in ringing tones

"Come back, you devils "

"Come on, lads, remembering the Lord! We're hardly the company he'll be after inviting to His Celebration "

A police whistle shrilled out and the soldier grumbled loudly

"Heroes, that's what we are, damn our hides We have let ourselves in for something this time! Now they'll warn the police on the other side If we don't drown, we're food for bugs in the cells I wash my hands of all responsibility "

Osip's cheerful voice led the men along after him as if on a string

"Watch your step, now! Keep your eyes down!"

We were walking diagonally against the current and I, as the last, could see clearly how cleverly tidy little Osip, with his white head so like a hare's, slithered over the ice, scarcely raising his feet After him, single file, as if strung out along an invisible thread, six dark figures trailed uncertainly and sometimes their shadows would alight beside them to lie down at their feet and stretch out over the ice All heads were down as though the men were climbing mountains and feared that a false step might lead to a fall

From behind the people were shouting even louder evidently a great crowd had collected, it was no longer possible to make out the words but an unpleasant roar was still clearly audible

For me, this cautious advance soon became a boring, mechanical exercise, I was used to walking fast and now I could feel myself sinking into that state between sleeping and waking when the mind becomes a blank, you cease to think about yourself, seem to exist outside your own self and yet, at the same time, you see and hear everything with

peculiar clarity and distinctness Under my feet lay the blue grey, leaden ice, all eroded by water, its scattered sparkle blinding to the eyes Here and there the ice was broken, raised in a hump, rubbed into small pieces by the movement of the river, lying in piles porous as pummy stone and sharp as broken glass Blue fissures, grinning coldly, caught at our feet The broad soles of our boots splashed up and down, the voices of Boyev and the soldier went grumbling on the pair of them like twin flutes put to the same lips

"I take no responsibility "

"Neither do I "

"The man who makes the decisions isn't necessarily the one with the brains "

"Do you think it's brains that get people anywhere in this country? It's having the loudest mouth "

Osip had tucked the hem of his sheepskin jacket right up into his belt, his legs in their grey trousers of army cloth trod lightly and supply, as though he were walking on springs He walked as though someone visible to him alone were whirling about in front of him, getting in his way and preventing him from setting a straight course by the shortest way, and he, Osip, were struggling against him, trying to get round him, to slip past him, fainting now to the right, now to the left, sometimes turning sharply back the way he had come, but still dancing onwards, executing curves and half-circles over the ice His voice sounded in a constant sing song and it was very pleasant to hear how well it mingled with the sound of the bells

We were approaching the centre of the 800-hundred or so yard strip of ice when from upriver came a sudden menacing rustling and whispering At the same moment the ice floated off from beneath me, I staggered and, failing to keep my feet, went down on one knee, caught off balance Immediately, as soon as I looked upriver, fear gripped me by the throat, took my voice away, darkened my sight the grey rind of ice had come to life, was arching up into mounds, sharp corners jutted up from the smooth surface, a

strange crunching noise shuddered through the air as though someone were walking heavy footed over broken glass

The water went streaming past me with a quiet, whistling sound, a tree cracked, squealing like a live thing, the men were shouting, crowding together and, breaking through this muffled, awesome clamour, Osip's voice rang out like a bell

"Separate get away from one another keep well apart, boys. She's on the move, on the mo-ove! Quick now, lads! Here she go-oes "

He went leaping on ahead as though pursued by hornets and, holding the two-yard measuring rod like a gun, prodded at the ice round about him as though he were fighting someone, and past him the town floated, trembling The ice immediately beneath me began to creak, breaking into small pieces, water flooded over my ankles, I leapt up and dashed blindly towards Osip

"Where do you think you're going?" he cried, threaten ing me with the measuring rod "Stand back, you devil!"

It seemed that Osip was Osip no longer his face had grown strangely younger, all that was familiar about it had been wiped away, the blue eyes had gone grey and he looked to have grown half a metre Straight as a new nail, his legs pressed close together, stretching upwards, he yelled with wide open mouth

"Don't mill around, don't crowd together I'll break your necks for you!"

And again he threatened me with the measuring rod

"Where do you think you're going?"

"We'll drown," I said quietly

"Ssh! That's enough "

But, looking me over, he added more gently and quietly

"Any fool can drown, but the thing is to get out anyhow!"

And again his voice rang out melodiously, shouting

words of encouragement as he stood with his head thrown back and chest expanded

The ice cracked a little and crunched, leisurely breaking into smaller and smaller pieces as it flowed on past the town Some great force had awaken in the earth and was stretching the bank, part of it beyond where we were, still stood firm, whereas the part opposite us was quietly floating away upstream and soon the earth would break asunder

This awesome, gradual movement took away all sense of belonging to the dry land everything was passing away, tearing at the heart and weakening the legs In the sky, red clouds were slowly floating and the broken ice, reflecting them, was flushed too, as if from the effort to get at me The whole vast Earth had come to life for the birth of Spring, it was stretching, arching up its high, moist, unkempt breast, its bones were cracking and the river was like a vein full of thick, boiling blood in the mighty flesh of the Earth

Depressing was the humiliating sense of insignificance and weakness amidst this calm, massive movement, and this humiliation smouldered within me and flamed up into the bold dream to stretch out one hand, to lay it commandingly on the hill, on the riverbank, and to say

"Stand still, wait, I am coming!"

Sadly sighed the echoing brass of the bells, but I remembered that in twenty four hours, at midnight, the chime would change to peals of rejoicing, ringing in the Resurrection!

I wanted to live to hear that chime!

Seven dark figures were swaying before my eyes, leaping on over the ice, they were waving the planks they carried as though raking the air and ahead of them like a will-o' the wisp danced a little old man who resembled Nicholas the Miracle Worker, and his authoritative voice never for one moment fell silent

"Watch out! "

The river had become rough, her living backbone was bending and trembling under our feet, like the whale's in the story of the Little Humpbacked Horse,[2] and more and

more often the liquid body of the river would come splashing up from under its hide of ice turgid, cold water, avidly licking at the men's legs

The men were crossing a narrow pole bridge over a deep fissure The quiet, compelling lap-lap of the water created an impression of fathomless depths, invoking thoughts of how infinitely slowly the body would sink into that cold, jostling mass, of how it would blind the eyes and stifle the heart It conjured up the images of men drowned, of oozy skulls, of swollen faces with staring glassy eyes, of outspread fingers and swollen hands, the skin damp and wrinkled on the palms like an old rag

The first to go under the ice was Mokey Budyrin, he had been walking ahead of the Mordvinian, silently as ever, almost aloof, calmer than any of us when, suddenly, as though he had been pulled in by the legs, he disappeared Only his head and shoulders remained on the ice, his arms gripping his plank

"He-elp!" yelled Osip "Don't all go crowding, one or two of you help!"

But Mokey, snorting and spitting, cried to the Mordvi nian and me

"Stand back, lads I'll manage it's all right. "

Clambering out onto the ice and shaking himself, he said

"The hell with it! You really could drown here, you know "

Now, his teeth chattering and licking his wet moustache with his tongue, he looked more than ever like a large, good natured dog

In a flash it came back to me how, a month ago, he had chopped off the tip of his left hand thumb with an axe, had picked up the pallid stump, the nail of which was rapidly turning blue, and, having had a good look at it with his dark, inscrutable eyes, said very quietly in a guilty little voice

"How many times I've spoilt the poor blighter, there's no counting It was dislocated anyway, didn't work proper ly Now I'll bury it "

Carefully he had wrapped the tip of his thumb in shavings and put it in his pocket, only then had he bandaged the wounded hand

The next one for a dip was Boyev it seemed as though he dived under the ice of his own volition and immediately set up a hysterical shrieking

"Hey, h heavens above, I'm drowning to death, brothers, help me ."

He threshed around so in his fear that it was hard work to extricate him and the Mordvinian nearly lost his life in the struggle, the waters actually closing once over his head

"Looked as though I was all set for Easter Matins in the Other Place," he said, scrambling out onto the ice and grinning sheepishly, looking still thinner and more angular

A minute later Boyev fell in again and again began screaming

"Don't scream, Yashka, you silly old goat!" shouted Osip, threatening him with the measuring rod "You'll start a panic! I'll learn you! Take your belts off, lads, turn your pockets inside out, it'll make things easier "

Every ten paces or so toothy jaws opened up before us all awash with murky saliva and sharp, blue fangs seized at our legs, it seemed as though the river wanted to suck in the men as a snake sucks down young frogs Our soaking shoes and clothes made it difficult to jump and weighed us down, all of us were as slippery as though we had been licked all over, clumsy and silent, we moved heavily, slowly and resignedly

Only Osip seemed to have worked out in advance where the fissures would appear in the ice and, as wet as any of us, was leaping from ice flow to ice flow like a hare, having jumped across he would pause for a second and, looking back, would call out in ringing tones

"Hey, there, watch how you go!"

He was playing with the river she was trying to catch him and he, small and nimble, kept slipping out of her clutches, easily outwitting her every manoeuvre, lightly evading unexpected traps It even seemed as though it were he who

was directing the flow of the ice, kicking large, solid ice flows back at us from beneath his feet

"Keep at it, sonnies, don't lose heart!"

"Well done, Uncle Osip!" the Mordvinian muttered with bated enthusiasm "Zere's a man for you! Zere's a real man "

The nearer we got to the bank, the more ground up and worn down was the ice, and the men were falling in more and more often The town had almost swum right past us, soon we would be borne out into the Volga and there the ice was not yet on the move and we would be sucked beneath it

"Maybe 'ee drown after all," said the Mordvinian quietly, glancing leftwards into the blue mists of the evening

But suddenly as though in pity for us a great wedge of ice drove itself firmly into the bank and, riding up onto the shore, breaking and crunching, came to rest there!

"Ru un!" yelled Osip furiously "Run for your lives!"

He leapt up, slipped, fell and, sitting on the edge of the ice flow with the water splashing up over him, shepherded us all past him five ran for the shore, jostling and overtaking one another The Mordvinian and I stopped, wanting to help Osip

"Run, you puppies, you donkeys, you Do as you're told!"

His face was blue and trembling, the eyes dull, the mouth strangely agape

"Get up, uncle "

He hung his head

"Broken my leg, I think can't "

We raised him and carried him and he, an arm round both our necks, grumbled his teeth chattering

"You'll drown, you young friends Well, thanks be to God, our Father He hasn't let it happen Look out, it won't hold three, step carefully! Choose where the ice is free of snow, it's firmer there You ought to leave me really! "

He looked into my face, his eyes crinkling at the corners, and asked

"And the record of our transgressions I dare say it's ›aked through now, no good at all, eh?"

As we stepped off the wedge of ice which had ridden up the bank crushing some boat or other to splinters as it did so, all that part of it which had remained in the water cracked loudly and, rocking and dipping, went sailing on

"Look at zet!" said the Mordvinian approvingly "She saw vat vee need!"

Wet, frozen and in tearing high spirits, we were now out on the bank among a crowd of local people, Boyev and the soldier were already arguing with them acrimoniously We laid Osip on some planks and he cried out merrily

"Hey, boys, that's the end of the book, it's all spoilt by the wet "

That book felt like a brick under my coat, unobtrusively getting it out, I threw it far into the river and it plopped into the dark water like a frog

The Dyatlovs went tearing off up the hill to the pub for vodka, clouting each other with their fists as they ran and yelling

"Take tha at!"

"You waait!"

An old man with the beard of an apostle and the eyes of a thief hissed with great conviction straight into my ear

"And for disturbing peace loving people, you heathens, you deserve a good thrashing "

Boyev, changing his shoes, shouted

"In what way have we disturbed you?"

"Christian folk drowning before your very eyes," grumbled the soldier, more hoarse than ever, "and what do you do to help them?"

"Well, what could we do?"

Osip lay on the ground, his legs stretched out before him and, feeling his sheepskin with trembling hands, com plained quietly

"Ah, the hell with it, everything soaked through All my clothes ruined and I haven't been wearing them a year yet!"

He had grown small again and wrinkled as though he were melting away before our eyes as he lay there on the ground

Suddenly, raising himself on one elbow, he struggled to a sitting position, gasped and, in an angry, high pitched voice launched out

"What the devil got into you fools you had to get to your bath and to church, if you please! You devil's ferrymen! You'll all come to a bad end As if God couldn't celebrate his Resurrection without you You might've been killed .. Spoilt all our clothes, blast you "

We were all changing shoes, wringing out our clothes, sniffing wearily, groaning, exchanging high words with the men from the suburbs, but he continued to shout at us with rising anger

"And then what must they take into their heads, the bloody fools! They want their bath there you are, what you *really* want is to have the police on you, they'ld give you baths "

One of the bystanders said soothingly

"The police've been sent for "

"What's your game?" Boyev shouted at Osip "What are you pretending for?"

"I?"

"You!"

"Wait a moment! What do you mean?"

"Who talked the men into trying to cross, eh?"

"Who?"

"You!"

"Me?"

Osip's face twitched as though from a spasm and in a breaking voice he repeated

"Me-ee?"

"You're right there," Budyrin put in calmly and clearly

The Mordvinian also backed him up, quietly, sadly

"Yes, Uncle Osip, you did, really you did! You 'ave forgotten "

"Of course you were the one who started it all," the soldier bellowed with dour authority

"He's forgo-otten!" shouted Boyev furiously "How could he have forgotten! Oh *no*! He's just trying to shift the guilt onto somebody else! He would!"

Osip fell silent and, narrowing his eyes, surveyed the wet, half dressed men

Then with a strange little catch in his breath either laughing or crying shrugging his shoulders and spreading out his hands, he began to mutter

"So I did quite true so it was all my idea Who would have thought it!"

"That's more like it!" shouted the soldier triumphantly

Looking out over the river, which was seething like boiling gruel of millet, Osip went on wrinkling his face and avoiding our eyes guiltily

"A black-out that's *what* it was . Oh Lordie Lordie! And how was it we didn't drown? There's no understanding Thank God, thank God! Lads You er don't be angry, it's Easter, after all forgive me, please! Something must've slipped in my mind, I suppose Quite true! I put you up to it old fool that I am ."

"Aha?" asked Boyev "And if I'd drowned, what would you have found to say then?"

It seemed to me that Osip was sincerely overcome by the needlessness and madness of what he had done slippery, as though he had been licked all over like a new born calf, he was sitting on the ground shaking his head, running his hands through the sand beneath him, and muttering words of penitence, not looking at anyone

I watched him, wondering what had happened to that militant leader of men who, going on before us, had led us with such care, skill and authority

My soul was filled with an unpleasant emptiness, I squatted down beside Osip and, hoping to preserve something, said softly to him

"Come off it, uncle Osip "

He squinted up at me and, running his fingers through

his beard, answered just as quietly

"Ever see the like? There you are "

And again started lamenting for all to hear

"What a thing to happen eh?"

On the top of the hill, silhouetted against an already darkening sky, there rose a black brush of trees, and the hill crouched over the river like some great beast The blue shadows of evening had appeared, peeping out from behind the rows of houses, clinging to the dark skin of the hill like bruises, peering from the reddish, moist jaws of the clay ravine which gaped onto the river as though it were reaching down to the water to drink

The river had grown darker, the whispering and creaking of the ice more muffled and regular, sometimes an ice floe would poke into the bank like the questing snout of a pig, remain motionless for a moment, rock, tear itself away and go floating on only to be replaced by another

The water was rising swiftly, splashing up the banks, washing away the dirt and the dirt dissolved like dark smoke in the turgid blue of the water The air was full of a strange sound, a crunching and a gulping as though some enormous animal were eating something and licking its lips with a long tongue

From the town came the sweet-sounding, melancholy pealing of bells, softened by distance

From up the hill like two noisy puppies the Dyatlov brothers were bouncing down with bottles in their hands and across their path parallel to the river bank a grey police officer and two black constables came walking

"Oh Lord!" groaned Osip, gently stroking his knee

The bystanders moved back a little at the sight of the police, an expectant silence fell, and the officer, a dry little man with a small face and pointed ginger moustaches came up to us and said severely in a rather hoarse, artificial bass

"So it was you, you devils "

Osip had collapsed on his back again and began to speak hurriedly

"It was me, your honour, I put them up to it! Forgive us, for the sake of this blessed season, your honour "

"What got into you, you old devil," the officer began loudly, but his shout was lost, drowned in the swift flow of sweet, caressing words

"Our homes are here, in the town, on that bank there was nothing to do, and we had not even the money to buy bread, and the day after tomorrow, your honour, is Easter Sunday we all needed a wash, we wanted to attend the service in church, as we are Christians, and so, I say Up and at it, lads, if God grants it is not as though we were going to commit some misdeed And, indeed, I have suffered for my foolhardiness look my poor leg is quite smashed to pieces!"

"Yes!" barked the officer sternly "And what if you had drowned, what would have happened then?"

Osip sighed a deep, weary sigh

"What would have happened, your honour? Nothing, if you'll excuse my saying so "

The policeman cursed us, we all listened to him silently and attentively, just as though the man were not dirtily and cynically insulting our mothers but saying something important that we should all of us know and treasure in our hearts

Then, having taken down our names, he went away We, warmed and cheered after the burning vodka, began to prepare to take ourselves off home, Osip, with a grin, looked after the departing policemen and suddenly, easily, rose to his feet and crossed himself fervently

"And that's the end of the story, praise be to God!"

"So," Boyev's nasal voice sounded bemused and disappointed, "so that leg of yours it's all right? You didn't break it after all?"

"And did you wish I had?"

"Eh, you comedian! You miserable clown you "

"Come on, lads!" Osip commanded, pulling his wet hat back onto his head

I walked along beside him and behind all the others, he

spoke to me very quietly, affectionately, as though he were passing on a secret known to him alone

"And whatever you do, however hard you try, well without cunning, without deceit, it's quite impossible to live Life just is that way, rot it It would be fine to ascend to the heights, only the devil's always clutching at one's heels "

Night had fallen In the darkness red and yellow lights flickered invitingly

"Come hither "

We were walking in the direction of the chimes on the hill, there was a tinkling of rills running from the high banks down under our feet and Osip's sweet voice mingled with their bubbling

"I got round the police nicely, didn't I? That's the way to get things done so that no one understands anything and everyone thinks that he himself is the king pin, yes. Let everyone think that it is his mind which has shaped events "

I listened to what he was saying, but understood little of it

What is more, I did not particularly want to understand, my heart was at ease, my mind at rest, I did not know whether or not I liked Osip but I did know that I was ready to follow him everywhere, anywhere we might need to go even back across the river with the ice slipping away from beneath our feet

The bells hummed and sang and it was good to think

"How many more times I shall be here to welcome the Spring!"

Osip remarked with a sigh

"But the soul of man the soul has wings it flies when he is asleep "

Wings? How wonderful!

1912

It was in the famine year of '92,[1] between Sukhum and Ochemchiry, on the river Kodor, a stone's throw from the sea the splash of the running surf could be heard distinctly above the cheerful babble of the glittering mountain stream

Autumn Yellow leaves of the cherry laurel tree were spinning and darting about in the white foam of the Kodor[2] like nimble trout I was sitting on the riverside rocks, thinking that the gulls and cormorants, too, were probably taking the leaves for fishes and were disappointed and that was why they were crying in such a hurt tone out there, on the right, beyond the trees, where the sea was lapping the shore

The chestnut trees overhead were spangled with gold, and at my feet lay numerous leaves that looked like hands that had been severed from human wrists The branches of the hornbeam on the opposite bank were already bare and hung in the air like a torn net Caught within it, there hopped a yellow and red mountain woodpecker, tapping at the bark of the trunk with its black beak to drive out the insects, which were gobbled up by those visitors from the far north the spry little tomtits and grey nuthatches

On my left, low over the mountain tops, hung smoky clouds, threatening rain Their shadows crept over the green slopes where the dead looking boxwood grew and where, in the hollows of the ancient beeches and lindens, one can find wild honey, which in the days of Rome nearly brought about the undoing of Pompey the Great's soldiers, a whole legion of whom were knocked off their feet by its intoxicating sweetness The bees make it from the blossoms of the laurel and azalea, and passers by scoop it out of tree hollows and eat it spread on *lavash* thin wheaten cakes

That is exactly what I was doing, sitting on the rocks under the chestnut trees and nursing the stings of an angry bee I dipped pieces of bread into a tea can filled with honey and ate while admiring the idle play of the tired autumn sun

The Caucasus in autumn is like the interior of a sumptuous cathedral built by men of great wisdom they are invariably great sinners too to conceal their past from the sharp eyes of conscience, a vast temple of gold, turquoise and emeralds, mountainsides carpeted with the finest rugs woven in silk by the Turkmen and in Samarkand and Shemaha They robbed the whole world and brought all their spoils here before the eyes of the sun, as much as to say "Thine from Thine to Thee!"

I see long bearded grey haired giants, wide-eyed like blithe children, coming down the mountains, decorating the land, scattering their multicoloured treasures with a lavish hand, covering the mountain tops with thick layers of silver, and draping the terraces with the living fabric of manifold trees and under their hands this heaven blessed patch of land becomes transformed into a thing of ineffable beauty

What a splendid calling that of a man in this world! What a wealth of wonderful things one sees, how poignantly sweet is the quiet delight in beauty that stirs one's heart!

To be sure, at times you find it hard Burning hatred fills your breast and anguish greedily sucks your heart's blood, but this cannot last for ever Even the sun often looks down on men very sadly it has worked so hard for them, and what a poor lot they have turned out to be

Naturally, there are quite a few good ones, but they need to be mended, or rather, to be remade anew

Above the bushes on my left I see dark bobbing heads Through the murmurs of the surf and the gurglings of the river one can faintly hear the sound of human voices They belong to the 'famine stricken", who had been building a road in Sukhum, and were now on their way to Ochemchiry, in the hope of getting another job there

I know them they are from Orel I had worked with them and we had been paid off together the day before I had left before them, at night, so as to reach the seashore in time to see the sunrise

There were five of them four muzhiks and a young peasant woman with high cheekbones She was pregnant, her huge belly protruded upwards, and there was a scared look in her blue grey staring eyes I see her head in a yellow kerchief, swaying above the bushes like a blossoming sunflower in the wind Her husband had died in Sukhum he had overeaten himself on fruit I had lived with these people in the same bunk house true to the good old Russian custom, they had talked about their misfortunes so much and so loudly that their lamentations must have been heard a good three miles away

These were dull people, crushed by misfortune, which had torn them from their native, worn-out, starving soil and swept them like autumn leaves to this place, where the strange, luxuriant clime staggered and dazzled them, the hard conditions of work had stunned them altogether They looked at everything around them bewilderedly out of sad, blinking, faded eyes, and smiled pitifully to each other, saying in low voices

"Ai ai, what land!"

"Rich isn't the word!"

"A bit stony, though "

"Not easy land, I must say

And then they recalled Kobyli Lozhok, Sukhoi Gon, Mokrenkoye[3] their native places, where every handful of earth was the ashes of their forefathers, where everything was well remembered, familiar and dear, watered with their sweat

There had been another woman with them there a tall, straight, lantern jawed woman with a chest as flat as a board, and with dull, coal black squinting eyes

In the evening she, together with the woman in the yellow kerchief, would go out back of the bunk house, sit down on a heap of stones, and with her cheek propped in

her hand and her head tilted to one side, would sing in a high pitched angry voice

Beyond the village churchyard,
Among the bushes green,
On the yellow sand I'll spread
My shawl so white and clean
And there I'll wait
For my loving bonny lad
And when he comes
I'll greet him heartily

The one in the yellow kerchief was usually silent, looking down with bent neck at her abdomen, but sometimes she would suddenly join in, singing the sobbing words of the song in a deep, lazy masculine voice

Ah, my darling,
Ah, dear heart,
I am not fated
To see thee more

In the black stuffy darkness of the southern night, these weeping voices reminded one of the snowy wilderness of the north, of shrieking blizzards and the distant howl of wolves

Then the cross-eyed woman fell ill with fever and was carried to town on a canvas stretcher She shivered on it and moaned as if continuing her song about the churchyard and the yellow sand

The head in the kerchief dived and disappeared

I finished my breakfast, covered the honey in my can with leaves, tied up my knapsack and followed leisurely in the track of the other people, my cornel wood stick tapping on the hard ground

There I was, on the narrow strip of the roadway On my right heaved the deep-blue sea It seemed as if invisible carpenters were working at it with thousands of planes, and the white shavings raced, rustling, for the beach, driven on by the wind, which was moist, warm and fragrant, like the

breath of a wholesome woman A Turkish felucca, heeling over to port, was slipping through the water headed for Sukhum, her sails puffed out like the fat cheeks of that pompous engineer in Sukhum a most important person age For some reason he always used to say "shush oop" for "shut up", and "moibee" for "may be"

"Shush oop! Moibee you think you're smart, but I'll have you hauled off to the police station in two ticks!"

He liked to have people dragged off to the police station, and it is good to think that the grave worms by now had probably cleaned him down to the bones

The going was easy, like floating through the air Pleasant thoughts, motley garbed memories weaved their slow dance through my mind The dancing figures within me were like the waves in the sea white-crested on top, and calm underneath in the depths, where the bright and buoyant hopes of youth swam quietly, like silvery fishes in the briny deep

The road crept to the seashore, winding its way nearer and nearer to the sandy strip that was lapped by the waves Even the bushes seemed eager to get a glimpse of the sea as they leaned over the ribbon of the road, straining towards the blue immensity of the watery wilderness

A wind was blowing from the mountains a sign of rain

A low moan came from the bushes a human moan, which always strikes a responsive chord in human hearts

I parted the bushes and saw the woman in the yellow kerchief She was leaning against the trunk of a walnut tree, her head drooping on her shoulder, her mouth contorted, her eyes wild and bulging Her hands were on her huge belly and she was breathing in such a dreadfully unnatural way that her belly jerked convulsively, while she held it in her hands, moaning and baring yellow wolfish teeth

"What is it? Has *someone hit you?*" I asked, *bending* over her She worked her bare legs spasmodically in the grey dust and gasped, rolling her heavy head

"Go away Have you no shame, go away "

I realised then what it was I had seen it once before I was frightened, of course, and started back, but the woman began to howl in a loud, drawn-out voice, her eyes fairly popping out of her head Tears welled up in them and rolled down her flushed tensed face

This made me go back to her I threw down by knapsack, kettle and tea can, laid her down flat on her back and was about to bend her knees up when she pushed me away, struck me in the face and chest, turned and crept farther into the bushes on all fours, snarling and growling like a she-bear

"Devil! Beast!"

Her arms gave way and she pitched forward on her face She began to scream again, stretching her legs convulsively

In a fever of excitement I quickly recollected everything I knew about this business I turned her over on her back and bent up her legs the membrane had already emerged

"Lie still, it's coming "

I ran down to the beach, rolled up my sleeves, washed my hands and went back to act as midwife

The woman writhed like birch bark in a bonfire She smacked the ground around her with her hands, tore up tufts of wilted grass which she kept trying to stuff into her mouth, and in doing so dropped earth on her contorted ghastly face with its wild bloodshot eyes Then the membrane broke and the child's head appeared I had to restrain the convulsive movements of her legs, help the child emerge and see that she did not stuff grass into her twisted moaning mouth

We swore at each other a bit she through clenched teeth, I just as quietly She from pain and, perhaps, from shame, I from embarrassment and infinite compassion

"God!" she gasped, biting her livid foaming lips, while from her eyes, which seemed suddenly to have faded in the sun, there poured the copious tears of a mother's terrible torment and her whole body was racked as if it were being torn asunder

"Go away you devil!"

She kept pushing me away with twisted arms, and I said earnestly

"Don't be a fool! Hurry up and get it over "

I was terribly sorry for her, and it seemed as if her tears were gushing from my eyes Anguish gripped my heart and I felt like screaming In fact I did scream

"Quick! Hurry up!"

And lo in my arms lay a man-child a red bit of humanity Though tears dimmed my eyes I could see that he was all red and, already displeased with the world, was struggling, kicking up a dust and yelling lustily, though still tied to his mother He had blue eyes, a funny little nose squashed on a red rumpled face and his lips moved as he bawled

"Ya a a Ya a a "

He was so slippery I was afraid he would slip out of my hands I was on my knees, looking at him, laughing I was that glad to see him And I had completely forgotten what had to be done next

"Cut the cord " the mother whispered, her eyes closed, her face drawn and grey like that of a corpse Her blue lips barely stirred as she repeated

"Cut it with your knife "

My knife had been stolen in the bunk house, so I bit through the navel cord The baby bawled like one of your real Orel bassos The mother smiled I saw a blue light come miraculously to life in the slumberous depths of her eyes, and her dark hand fumbled in her skirt, searching for her pocket, while she breathed through blood stained bitten lips

"I've no . strength Bit of tape in my pocket Tie up navel "

I found the tape and tied up the baby's navel Her smile brightened, so happy and radiant that it all but dazzled me

"Put yourself straight while I go and wash him "

She murmured anxiously

"Take care Do it gently Take care "

That red bit of humanity did not need gentle handling at

all He clenched his fists and yelled as if he were challenging me to a fight

"That's the stuff! Assert yourself, old chap, if you don't want your fellowmen to twist your head off for you "

He emitted his most earnest and loudest yell when he felt the touch of spray from a wave that splashed over both of us, afterwards, when I began to slap his chest and back, he screwed up his eyes, and began to struggle and scream as the waves washed over him one after another

"Yell away, old chap! Yell your head off!"

When we got back to his mother we found her lying on the ground with her eyes closed again, biting her lips in the throes of afterbirth, but through the groans and sighs I heard her dying whisper

"Give him to me "

"He can wait "

"Give him to me!"

With fumbling, trembling hands she began to undo her blouse I helped her to free her breast, which nature had made for the nurturing of twenty infants, and laid the obstreperous Orelian against her warm body He twigged at once and stopped yelling

"Holy Virgin, Mother of God," the woman breathed, quivering, rolling her dishevelled head from side to side on the knapsack

Suddenly, with a low cry, she opened her eyes again, the sacred, inexpressibly beautiful eyes of motherhood They were blue, and looked up into the blue sky A happy, grateful smile gleamed and melted in them Raising a heavy arm, the mother slowly crossed herself and her child

"Blessed Mother of God Holy Virgin be praised "

Her eyes dimmed and she remained silent for a long time, scarcely breathing Then suddenly, in a firm, matter of fact voice, she said

"Untie my knapsack, lad "

I untied the bag She looked at me steadily with a faint smile, and I thought I saw a tinge of colour suffuse her hollow cheeks and clammy forehead

"Go away a minute "

"Take it easy "

"All right Go away "

I moved away into the bushes My heart felt tired, and it seemed as if blithe birds were singing in my breast This, together with the ceaseless murmur of the sea, was so good that I could listen to it for a year

Somewhere nearby I heard the babble of a brook It was like a girl telling her friend about her beloved

Above the bushes rose a head in a yellow kerchief, now tied in the proper way

"Hey, what's this? You're up too soon, aren't you?"

Holding on to the branches of a bush, she sat there ashen faced, as though all the life had been drained from her, and with two great blue pools instead of eyes She smiled and whispered with tender emotion

"Look how he sleeps "

He slept all right, no different from any other babies, as far as I could see The difference, if any, was in the surroundings he was lying on a heap of bright autumn leaves under a bush, of the kind that don't grow in the Orel countryside

"You ought to lie down, mother "

"No," she said, shaking her head feebly "I've got to tidy up and move along to that place what d'you call it?"

"Ochemchiry?"

"That's it My folks must be a good few versts away by now "

"You're not going to walk, surely?"

"What about the Holy Virgin? She'll help me "

Well, since she had the Holy Virgin for company, I had nothing more to say!

She gazed down at the puckered little face, her eyes radiating warm beams of kindly light She licked her lips and stroked her breast with slow movements of the hand

I lighted a fire and arranged stones around it on which to put the kettle

"I'll make some tea for you in a minute, mother "

"Oh, do! Everything has dried up in my chest "

"What made your folks desert you?"

"Oh no, they didn't I just dropped behind They'd had a drink, you know and a good thing too Fancy having to do this with them around "

She glanced at me and covered her face with her elbow, then spat out with blood and smiled shyly

"This your first?"

"Yes Who are you?"

"A man, sort of "

"So I see Are you married?"

"Haven't had the honour "

"You're kidding!"

"I'm not "

She lowered her eyes, then said

"How is it you know this women's business?"

Now for the kidding

"I learned it," I said "I'm a student d'you know what that is?"

"To be sure I do Our priest's eldest son is a student He's learning to be a priest "

"Well, I'm one of those I'll go and fetch some water "

The woman bent her head over to her baby to hear whether he was breathing Then she glanced towards the sea

"I could do with a wash, but the water is strange here What kind of water is it? It's salty and bitter "

"You go and wash in it it's healthy water "

"Really?"

"Yes And it's warmer than the brook, the water there's like ice "

"If you say so "

An Abkhazian, dozing astride a horse, rode past at a walking pace, his head drooping on his chest The wiry little horse, twitching its ears, looked askance at us with a round black eye and snorted The rider jerked up his head, on

which sat a shaggy fur hat, glanced in our direction and lowered his head again

"Funny people round here, so fierce looking too," the Orel woman said quietly

I went for some water The jet, clear and mercurial, leapt over the stones and the autumn leaves tumbled about gaily in the water Wonderful! I washed my hands and face, filled the kettle and walked back Through the bushes I saw the woman crawling about on her knees, glancing back anxiously

"What's the matter?"

She started, and her face turned grey She was trying to conceal something under her body I guessed what it was

"Give it to me, I'll bury it "

"Oh, my dear! But it has to be done under the bathhouse, under the floor "

"Can you see them building a bathhouse here soon?"

"You're joking, but I'm scared! What if some beast eats it! It s got to be buried in the ground "

She turned her face away and handed me a wet heavy bundle, saying in a low, shy voice

"You'll do it properly, in a deep place, won't you? For the sake of Christ and my little one, do it properly, please "

When I got back I saw her coming away from the beach with staggering steps and outstretched arms, her skirt wet to the waist and her face slightly flushed as if radiating from within I helped her to the fire, thinking with amazement "What sheer animal strength!"

Then we drank tea with honey, and she said quietly

"So you dropped learning?"

"Yes "

"Drink, I suppose?"

"Yes, ruined by drink, mother!"

"What a shame! Mind you, I noticed you in Sukhum when you had that row with the manager about the food I said to myself then he must be a drunkard, he's not afraid of anybody "

She licked the honey from her swollen lips and kept

turning her blue eyes to the bush where the latest Orelian was sleeping peacefully

"I wonder how he'll live?" she said with a sigh looking at me searchingly "You were a help thank you but will it be good for him, I wonder "

When she had eaten and drunk she crossed herself, and while I was collecting my household, she sat drowsily swaying her body, staring at the ground with eyes that seemed to have faded again Then she stood up

"Are you really going?"

"Yes "

"Are you sure you re strong enough?"

"What about the Virgin Mary? Give him to me!"

"I'll carry him "

After an argument she yielded, and we started off, walking side by side, shoulder to shoulder

"I hope I don't stumble," she said with an apologetic smile, placing her hand on my shoulder

The new inhabitant of the land of Russia, the man of unknown destiny, was lying in my arms, making grownup noises through his nose The sea laced with white shavings, splashed and murmured, the bushes whispered to each other, the sun shone on its noontide path

We walked along slowly, the mother stopping now and again, heaving a deep sigh throwing her head back, gazing around at the sea, the woods, the mountains then peering into her son's face Her eyes, laved by the tears of suffering, were amazingly limpid again, shining with the blue light of infinite love

Once she stopped and said

"God! My God, how wonderful it is! How wonderful! I could go on like this on and on to the world's end, with him, my little one, growing and growing in freedom at his mother's breast, my darling little boy "

The sea murmured and murmured

1912

The Creepy Crawlies

One hot summer's night, in a lonely street on the outskirts of the town, I witnessed a strange scene a woman was standing in the middle of a large puddle, stamping her feet and splashing the mud about the way children do stamping and singing a dirty song in a snuffling voice

A violent thunderstorm had swept over the town during the day and the downpour had soaked the clayey mud in the street, the puddle was a deep one, and the woman's legs sank into it almost up to the knees Judging by the sound of her voice, the singer was drunk If, tired out with dancing, she fell in the mud, she could easily drown in it

Pulling up the tops of my highboots, I waded into the puddle, took the dancer by the arms and dragged her to dry ground For a moment she must have been frightened, because she followed me submissively, but then she wrenched her right arm free with a twist of her whole body, hit me in the chest and yelled "Help!"

The next minute she was back in the puddle, dragging me in with her

"To hell with you!" she muttered "I won't go! I'll live without you you try and live without me help!"

A night watchman emerged from the darkness, stopped within five paces of us and said gruffly

"What's the row about?"

I told him that I was afraid the woman might drown in the mud and that I was trying to get her out The watchman took a closer look at the drunken woman, spat loudly and commanded

"Mashka, come on out!"

"I don't want to "

"Come out, I tell you!"

"I won't "

"D'you want me to give you a good hiding, damn ver?" the watchman said mildly, then turned to me, adding good naturedly and chattily "She's a local woman, a tow picker, Mashka Frolikha Got a fag?"

We lit up The woman stamped about in the puddle, shouting

"Bosses! I'm my own boss If I want to I'll take a dip "

"I ll dip you one below your back!" the watchman warned he was a bearded sturdy old man "She kicks up a row like this every blessed night And at home she has a legless son "

"Does she live far from here?"

"She ought to be killed," the watchman said, leaving my question unanswered

"Someone ought to take her home," I suggested

The watchman snorted into his beard, peered into my face in the light of his cigarette and walked off, tramping heavily through the mud

"Take her! But have a good look at her mug first "

The woman sat down in the mud, and began threshing her arms about in it, screeching in a hideous snuffling voice

Like rowing in the sea.

From the black chasm of the sky a big star was reflected in the dirty greasy water When ripples covered the puddle the reflection disappeared I waded into the puddle again, grasped the singer under the armpits, lifted her, and, pushing her along with my knees, carried her out to the fence She resisted, waved her arms about and challenged me

"Hit me, come on, hit me! Who cares! Oh, you beast oh, you rotter Come on, hit me!"

I leaned her up against the fence and asked where she lived She raised her drunken head and looked at me with dark bleary eyes I saw the sunken bridge of her nose, the remainder of which stuck out and upward like a button, her upper lip, twisted up by a scar, bared a row of small teeth, and her small plump face leered at me

"All right, come along," she said

We started off, bumping against the fence The wet hem of her skirt whipped my legs

"Come along, dearie," she said hoarsely, seeming to grow sober "I'll be nice to you I'll give you comfort "

She brought me to a large two-storied house standing in a yard Gingerly, like a blind woman, she threaded her way between carts, barrels, packing cases and wood piles scattered in the yard, and stopped in front of a hole in the foundation

"Go down," she said

Leaning against the slimy wall with my arm round the woman's waist to hold up the lurching body, I descended the slippery steps Gropingly I found the felt covering and the bolt of the door, opened it and stopped on the threshold of the black hole, hesitating to go further

"Mummy, is that you?" a low voice came out of the darkness

"It's me "

The smell of warm rot mingled with that of pitch hit me in the face A match was struck and in its tiny glow I caught a momentary glimpse of a child's pale face

"Who else could it be? It's me," the woman repeated, leaning her whole weight against me

Another match was struck, there was a tinkle of glass, and a skinny funny hand lighted a small tin oil lamp

"My precious," the woman said, swaying and slumped down in a corner There, barely rising above the brick floor, a wide shakedown had been prepared

Tending the flame of the lamp, the child turned down the wick, which had flared and begun to smoke His face was grave, sharp-nosed, with bunched lips like a girl's a face painted with a fine brush and strikingly incongruous in this dark damp hole Having fixed the light he glanced at me with shaggy looking eyes and said, "She's drunk?"

His mother lay across the bed, making sobbing, snoring noises

"She ought to be undressed," I said

"Then undress her," the boy answered, lowering his eyes

When I started pulling off the woman's wet skirts, he enquired in a low matter-of fact voice

'Shall I put the lamp out?"

"What for?"

He did not answer While I was busy with his mother, handling her as I would a sack of meal, I watched him He was sitting in a packing case on the floor, under the window The case was made of thick boards and bore the inscription in black printed letters

HANDLE WITH CARE
N R & Co

The sill of the square window was on a level with the boy's shoulder Along the wall were several rows of narrow shelves with stacks of cigarette boxes and match boxes on them Next to the case in which the boy sat was another case covered with yellow packing paper, which apparently did service as a table His pitiful arms clasped at the back of his neck, the boy was looking up at the dark windowpanes

Having undressed the woman, I tossed her wet clothes on the stove, then I washed my hands in a corner out of an earthenware wash stand, and said to the child as I wiped them on my handkerchief

"Well, good bye!"

He looked at me and said with a slight lisp

"Shall I put the lamp out now?"

"Just as you like "

"Are you going away, aren't you going to lie down?" He pointed a skinny arm at his mother "With her "

"What for?" I said blankly

"You know yourself," he said with shocking simplicity, then added "They all do "

Disconcerted, I looked around On my right was the jutting ugly stove, on the hearth dirty dishes, in a corner, behind the packing case, pieces of tarred rope, a heap of oakum, billets of woods, chips and a yoke

Stretched at my feet was the yellow snoring body
"May I sit with you a bit?" I asked the boy
He gave me a sullen look and said
"She won't wake up till the morning, you know "
"Oh, I don't need her "

I squatted down beside his packing case and told him how I had met his mother I tried to speak in a jocular tone

"She sat down in the mud and started rowing, like she was using oars, and singing "

He nodded, smiling a wan little smile the while he scratched his narrow chest

"That's because she's drunk She larks about even when she's sober Just like a little girl "

I could now see his eyes clearly they really were shaggy, with surprisingly long eyelashes, and little hairs grew thickly on his eyelids too Bluish shadows lay under his eyes, accentuating the pallor of his skin, and his high forehead with a crease over the bridge of his nose was crowned with a shock of curly reddish hair The expression of his eyes, attentive, calm, was indescribable It was all I could do to sustain their strange, unearthly look

"What's wrong with your legs?"

He fumbled among the rags and disengaged a withered leg, which resembled a poker He lifted it with his hand and placed it on the edge of the case

"See what they're like? Both of 'em, born that way They don't walk, they're not alive just useless "

"And what are in those little boxes?"

"That's my mangery," he said, picking his leg up with his hand as if it were a stick and thrusting it back among the rags at the bottom of the case Then with a bright friendly smile he said

"Would you like to see it? Then sit down properly You've never seen anything like it in your life "

With deft movements of his thin, disproportionately long arms he raised himself and began taking boxes off the shelves, handing them to me one by one

"Be careful don't open them, they'll run away! Put it to your ear and listen! Well?"

"Something stirring inside "

"Aha That's a spider, the blighter! He's called the Drummer As cunning as they make 'em!"

The wonderful eyes lighted up and a smile played upon the bluish face With swift deft hands he took the boxes off the shelves, put them to his ear, then to mine and commented animatedly

"And here's cockroach Anisim, a braggart, like a soldier This is a fly, Mrs Official, a nasty piece o' work Buzzing all day long, swearing at everybody, she even dragged Mummy around by the hair Not the fly the Missus living across the road, the fly only looks like her And this is a black beetle, a great big beetle the Boss, he's not bad, only he's a drunkard and a shameless fellow When he's on the booze he crawls about the yard naked, all hairy like a black dog And here is a dung beetle, Uncle Nikodim I caught him outside He's a bum, really, calls himself a holy wanderer Supposed to be collecting money for a church, Mummy calls him Cheapskate, he's one of her lovers too She has umpteen lovers, thick as flies around her, though she has no nose "

"Does she beat you?"

"Who, she? I like that! She can't live without me She's kind hearted, only a drunkard but then they're all drun kards in our street She's beautiful and gay, too A hell of a drunkard, a whore! I tell her get off the booze, you silly woman, you'll get rich but she just laughs A fool of a woman, what can you expect! But she's good, you'll see when she wakes up "

He smiled engagingly, a smile so sweet that I felt like blubbering, crying out for the whole town to hear me, so deeply wrung was my heart with compassion His beautiful head nodded on his thin neck like a strange flower, and his eyes, growing brighter and brighter with animation, at tracted me with irresistible force

Listening to his childish, but ghastly prattle, I had forgotten for a moment where I was, and suddenly I became aware again of the prison like window, spattered with mud outside, the black maw of the stove the pile of oakum in the corner, and by the door, on a heap of rags, yellow like oil the body of the mother woman

"Nice manigery, isn't it?" the boy said with pride

"Very nice "

"I have no butterflies, though no butterflies or moths "

"What's your name?"

"Lvonka "

"You're my namesake "

"Really? What kind of person are you?"

"Oh, just nobody "

"Tell me another one! Every person is somebody, I ought to know You're a good body "

' Maybe "

"I can see it You're scary, too "

"Scary?"

"You bet!"

He smiled a knowing smile and even winked at me

"What makes you think I'm scary?"

"Well, you're sitting with me here, and that shows you're scared to go out at night!"

' But day is breaking already "

"And you'll go away "

"I'll come again to see you "

He did not believe me He covered those sweet shaggy eyes of his with his evelashes, then said, after a pause

"What for?"

"To sit with you You are very interesting May I come?"

"Go ahead Everyone comes here "

With a sigh he added

"You're only kidding "

"I'm not I'll come, really!"

"All right then But come to me, not to Mummy who wants her? Let's be friends, you and me!"

"All right."

"There. It doesn't matter that you're a grownup. How old are you?"

"Getting on for twenty-one."

"And I'm getting on for twelve. I have no chums, only Katka the water-carrier's girl, but her mother beats her because she comes to see me. Are you a thief?"

"No. Why a thief?"

"You've got such an ugly mug, skinny as anything and with a long nose, just like thieves have. We have two thieves coming here, one of 'em Sashka, a fool and a bully, the other Vanichka—he's kind-hearted, like a dog. Have you got any little boxes?"

"I'll bring some."

"Do. I won't tell Mummy you're coming."

"Why not?"

"Just like that. She's ever so pleased when men come again. She loves men, the baggage—not half she does. A funny kid, that Mummy o' mine. Got herself in the family way with me when she was fifteen and doesn't know herself how it happened. When will you be coming?"

"Tomorrow evening."

"By evening she'll be drunk. What do you do for a living if you don't thieve?"

"I sell Bavarian kvass."

"Do you? Bring me a bottle, eh?"

"Why, sure. Well, I'll be going."

"Go ahead. Will you come again?"

"Sure."

He held out both long arms and I took those thin cold little bones in my own two hands and shook them. Without looking back at him I clambered out into the yard like a drunken man.

Day was breaking. A tremulous dying Venus hung over the damp heap of tumbledown structures. The square eyes of the basement windows, dull and dirty like the eyes of a drunkard, stared at me out of the muddy hole beneath the wall of the house. A red-faced man lay asleep in a cart by the

gate, his huge bare legs sprawled wide apart and his thick stiff beard sticking up into the sky white teeth shone in it, as if the man, his eyes shut, were laughing fiendishly, derisively An old dog with a bald patch on its back, apparently caused by scalding water, came up to me, sniffed at my leg and whimpered hungrily, filling my heart with unbidden compassion

The puddles in the streets, which had settled overnight, mirrored the morning sky, and the blue and pink reflections gave to the dirty puddles an offensive, needless, soul confounding beauty

The next day I asked the children in my street to catch some beetles and butterflies for me, I bought some pretty little boxes at the chemist's and went to see Lyonka, taking with me two bottles of kvass, some honey-cakes, sweets and buns

Lyonka received my gifts with utter amazement, his eyes wide and more beautiful than ever in the light of day

"Gosh!" he said in a deep unchildlike voice "Look at all this! Are you a rich man, or what? How can it be a rich man, so poorly dressed, and not a thief, you say? Gee, what lovely boxes! I'm afraid to touch 'em even, I haven't washed my hands What's that inside? Oo-ow what a whopper of a beetle! All coppery, even green oh, gosh! What if they run out and fly away?! Nothing doing "

Then all of a sudden he shouted gaily

"Mum! Come on, you tart, get down and wash my hands Just look what he's brought You know, the one who came last night and lugged you in, like the copper on point duty His name's Lyonka too "

"You should say thank you to him," I heard an oddly quiet voice behind me

The boy nodded vigorously

"Thank you, thank you!"

A dense cloud of hair like dust floated about in the basement, and through it I could just make out, on the ledge of the stove, the frowzy head, the disfigured face of the

woman, the glint of her teeth, bared in that involuntary, ineffaceable smile.

"Good morning!"

"Good morning," the woman answered. Her snuffling voice was quiet but cheerful, almost gay. She looked at me through narrowed eyes, in a mocking sort of way.

Lyonka, forgetting about me, was chewing a honey-cake, mumbling to himself as he carefully opened the boxes. His eyelashes cast a shadow on his cheeks, accentuating the blue under his eyes. The sun, bleary like the face of an old man, looked through the dirty windowpanes. It shed a soft light on the boy's reddish hair. His shirt was open at the throat and I could hear the heart beating behind the thin bones, raising the skin and the barely perceptible nipple.

His mother got down from the stove, moistened a towel under the wash-stand, went up to Lyonka and took his left hand.

"He's run away, stop, he's run away!" he shouted, wriggling about in his box, twisting his whole body round, scattering the rags beneath him and baring his livid immobile legs. The woman laughed, fumbling among the rags.

"Catch him!" she shouted.

She caught the beetle, placed it in the palm of her hand, examined it with sprightly eyes the colour of cornflowers, and said to me in the tone of an old acquaintance:

"We have lots of these."

"Don't squash it," her son said warningly. "She sat down on my manigery once when she was drunk and squashed a whole lot of 'em."

"Forget it, my precious."

"I buried them, heaps of 'em."

"But I caught some more for you afterwards, didn't I?"

"What's the use! Those you squashed were trained beetles, stupid head. When they peg out I bury them under the stove—I crawl out and bury 'em—I have a cemetery there. You know, I once had a spider, Minka, just like one of

Mum's lovers one of the old ones who's now in jail, a fat jolly fellow "

"Oh, you precious darling," the woman said, stroking the boy's curls with a small, dark, stubby fingered hand Then, nudging me with her elbow, she said with smiling eyes

"A fine son? What eyes, eh?"

"You can take one eye and give me back my legs," Lyonka said, grinning, as he examined the beetle "Looks like iron Fat Like that monk, Mum the one you knitted the ladder for remember?"

"I should say I do "

Laughing, she began to tell me the story

"A monk blew in one day, a great hulking fellow, and he says, 'Now you're a tow picker can you make me a rope ladder?' I'd never heard of such ladders in all my born days No, I says, I couldn't 'Then I'll teach you,' he says He threw open his cassock, and would you believe it, he had a thin rope wound round his whole belly, a long coil of strong rope He taught me how to do it I knitted away and kept wondering now, what does he want it for? To rob a church maybe?"

She laughed, put her arm round her son's shoulder and kept stroking it

"A bunch o' lively cards! He came at the appointed time, and I says to him If you want this for robbery, my man, then I'm not having any! But he just laughs kind o' cunningly 'No,' he says, 'it's for climbing over a wall We've got a big high wall down at our place, and we're sinful men, with sin living just on the other side of the wall get me?' I got it then He wanted it to go out wenching at night Did we laugh, he and I "

"You love a good laugh, you do," the boy said in the tone of an elder "What about putting on the samovar?"

"But we have no sugar "

"Go and buy some "

"We have no money either "

"Ugh, your drinking's a ruination! Take some from him." He turned to me: "Have you got any money?"

I gave the woman some money. She sprang to her feet with alacrity, took a small, dented, smudgy samovar off the stove, and went out, humming a tune to herself.

"Mummy!" the boy shouted after her. "Wash the window, I can't see anything!"

"Smart bit o' poultry, let me tell you!" he went on, as he carefully laid the boxes with the insects out on the shelves. The shelves were of cardboard, suspended on strings from nails driven between the bricks of the damp wall. "Hard-working too. When she starts picking the tow you can choke. The place is full o' dust. I cry: Mummy take me out into the yard, for God's sake, I'll choke in here. But she says, put up with it, keep me company, she says. She loves me, no mistake! She works and sings, knows thousands o' songs, she does."

Animated, his wonderful eyes glowing, his thick eyebrows raised, he began to sing in a hoarse alto voice:

There on the sofa lies Sophie...

After listening for a while, I said:

"That isn't a nice song."

"They're all like that," Lyonka reassured me, then suddenly started: "Hark, the music has arrived! Quick, lift me up."

I raised his light little bones enclosed in a sack of grey thin skin. Eagerly, he thrust his head through the open window and hung there stock-still, his withered legs dangling helplessly down the wall. Outside, a street-organ was raucously grinding out scraps of some tune or other, a bass-voiced child was shouting joyfully and a dog was howling quietly. Lyonka listened to this music and hummed softly in tune with it.

The dust in the basement had settled and it grew lighter. Over his mother's bed hung a cheap clock, its pendulum, the size of a penny, crawling limpingly over the grey wall. The dishes on the hearth were unwashed, and on everything lay

a thick layer of dust heaviest of all on the cobwebs in the corners, which hung down in dirty tatters Lyonka's dwelling resembled a dust hole, and the unmitigated ugliness of squalor stared one brazenly in the face from every inch of this hole

The samovar began to hum its dismal tune, and the street-organ, as if scared by it, suddenly fell silent A hoarse voice snarled "Riff raff!"

"Take me down," said Lyonka, sighing "They've chased him away "

I seated him in the box, and he winced and rubbed his chest with his hands, coughing carefully

"My chest hurts Breathing real air a long time is bad for me I say, did you ever see devils?"

"No "

"Nor did I I keep looking under the stove in the night, in case they come out But they don't come Devils haunt cemeteries, don't they?"

"What do you want with them?"

"It's interesting What if one of the devils was a good one? Katka the water-carrier's girl saw a devilkin in the cellar she took fright But I'm not afraid of frightful things "

He tucked the rags round his legs and continued briskly

"I like 'em even I like frightful dreams, I do I once dreamt a tree with the roots growing on top the leaves on the ground and the roots stretching up into the sky I was all in a sweat and woke up scared stiff And once I saw Mummy she was lying naked and a dog was eating out her stomach He'd bite off a piece and spit it out, bite off another one and spit it out And once our house shook itself and went riding down the street, its doors and windows banging, and that Official woman's cat running after it "

He twitched his thin shoulders in a shivery way, took a sweet, unwrapped the coloured paper, smoothed it out carefully and laid it on the windowsill

"I'll make all kinds of nice things out of these papers Or maybe I ll give them to Katka She likes nice things,

too bits of glass, crocks, papers and things I say, if you keep feeding and feeding a beetle, it'll grow up like a horse, won't it?"

Clearly, he believed this, so I answered

"If you feed it well, it will "

"No, really!" he cried, overjoyed "But Mummy just laughs, *the silly ninny*!"

He added a foul swear word

"She's foolish You can feed a cat up to a horse much quicker, can't you?"

"I daresay "

"I haven't got the feed, worse luck It would be grand!"

He was tense with excitement, his hand clutched tight to his chest

"Flies would fly about the size of a dog And you could use a beetle to haul loads of bricks if he's as big as a horse, he'd be strong, wouldn't he!"

"The trouble is they've got whiskers "

"That doesn't matter, you can use the whiskers as reins Or take a crawling spider, say a whopper as big as as what? I wouldn't have him bigger'n a kitten, though, he'd be too frightful! I wish I had legs, I'd show 'em what's what! I'd work like mad and feed up my whole manigery I'd open a shop, and afterwards I'd buy Mummy a house in an open field Have you ever been in an open field?"

"Why, yes "

"What is it like, tell me?"

I began to tell him about fields and meadows, and he listened attentively without interrupting His eyelashes dropped over his eyes and his mouth opened slowly as if the boy were falling asleep Seeing this, I lowered my voice, but his mother came in with the boiling samovar, a paper bag under her arm and a bottle of vodka sticking out from under her jacket

"Here we are!"

"Could you beat that," sighed the boy, wide-eyed "*Nothing but grass and flowers. Mum, couldn't you get a hand-cart somewhere and take me out into the open field!*

I'll die without ever seeing it You're such a pig, Mum, really!" he wound up in a sad pained voice

His mother said kindly "You shouldn't swear You're too little yet "

"It's all right for you to say 'don't swear' you go where you like, just like a dog You're lucky I say," he said, turning to me, "was it God who made the field?"

"I suppose so "

"What for?"

"For people to walk in "

"Open field," the boy said, smiling wistfully "I'd take my manigery out there and set them all free, I would Let 'em have a good time, my domestics I say, do they make God in a *bogadelnya*?" [1]

His mother squealed, convulsed with laughter She threw herself down on the bed, kicking her legs and shrieking

"Oh, carry me upstairs, somebody! Oh, my precious! Oh, what a scream!"

Lyonka glanced at her with a smile and affectionately uttered a dirty swearword

"Gets herself in stitches, just like a child! She loves a good laugh, she does "

And he used the swearword again

"Let her laugh," I said "You don't mind, do you?"

"No, I don't mind," Lyonka agreed "I'm only angry with her when she doesn't wash the window I keep begging her, wash the window, I can't see the blessed daylight, but she forgets all the time "

The woman chuckled as she washed the tea things and winked to me with a bright blue eye

"Isn't he a jewel, bless his heart? If it wasn't for him I'd have drowned myself a long time ago, really! Or hanged myself "

She said this smiling

Lyonka suddenly asked me

"Are you a fool?"

"I don't know Why?"

"Mummy says you are a fool "

"Yes, but why?" the woman exclaimed, not at all put out. "He brings a drunken woman in from the street, puts her to bed and goes off, just like that! I didn't mean it spitefully. What a telltale you are, ugh!"

She, too, spoke like a child, her manner of speech was that of a little girl. Her eyes, too, were clear as a child's—all the more ugly by contrast was her noseless face with the raised upper lip and bared teeth. A sort of walking, sinister sneer, a gay mockery.

"Well, let's have tea," she said with a solemn air.

The samovar stood on a case next to Lyonka, and a mischievous jet of steam spouting from under the dented lid touched his shoulder. He put his hand over it, and when his palm became moist from the steam, he wiped it on his hair, his eyes wearing a dreamy look.

"When I grow up big," he said, "Mum will make me a handcart and I'll crawl about the streets, go begging. And when I've begged enough money I'll crawl out into the open field."

"Oho-ho," his mother sighed and the next moment laughed softly. "He thinks a field is a paradise, the darling! But there are only camps there, and shameless soldiers, and drunks."

"No, there aren't," Lyonka checked her, frowning. "You ask him what it's like, he's seen it."

"So have I."

"When drunk."

They started arguing, just like children. Just as hotly and illogically. Meanwhile, warm evening had set in, and a thick grey-blue cloud stood in the reddening sky. It grew dark in the basement.

The boy drank a mug of tea and perspired. He glanced at me, then at his mother, and said:

"I'm full up, I even feel sleepy, really...."

"Go to sleep then," his mother advised.

"And he'll go away! Will you go away?"

"Don't worry, I won't let him go," the woman said, nudging me with her knee.

"Don't go away," Lyonka said He shut his eyes, stretched luxuriously and dropped back into his packing case Then suddenly he raised his head and said to his mother in a tone of rebuke

"Why don't you marry him like other women do, instead of messing about with every Tom, Dick and Harry they only beat you He's a kind man, he is "

"Go to sleep," the woman said softly, bending over the saucer from which she was drinking her tea

"And he's rich "

For a minute the woman was silent, sipping the tea with awkward lips, then she said to me as she would to an old acquaintance

"So that's how we live, just jogging along, he and I and no one else They scold me out in the yard call me a loose woman So what? I've got nothing to be ashamed of Besides, I'm damaged goods on the outside, as you can see Everyone can see at once what I'm good for Yes He's fallen asleep, my precious It's a good child I have "

"Yes Very good!"

"I can't get enough of looking at him Clever, too, isn't he?"

"A wise head "

"You said it His father was a gentleman, an old boy One of those what d'you call 'em? They have an office you know Write papers "

"A notary?"

"That's it! Nice old gentleman Kind He loved me, I worked as a maid in his house "

She covered her son's bare legs with the rags, arranged the dark thing that served as a pillow under his head, then resumed in an easy manner

"All of a sudden he died It happened in the night, soon after I had left him He dropped down on the floor, just dropped down dead You're in business selling kvass?"

"Yes "

"On your own?"

"For a boss "

She moved closer, saying

"You needn't feel squeamish about me, young man I'm not infectious any more, ask anyone in the street, they all know it "

"I'm not squeamish "

She laid her small hand with the roughened fingers and broken nails on my knee and went on earnestly

"I am ever so grateful to you for Lyonka it's been a real holiday for him today This is a good thing you have done "

"I must be going," I said

"Where?" she asked, surprised

"I have business to attend to "

"Stay here!"

"I can't "

She looked at her son, then at the window and the sky, and said quietly

"Why not stay? I'll cover my mug with a kerchief I do want to thank you for my son's sake I'll cover myself up, eh?"

She spoke with such earnest human warmth, with such good feeling And her eyes the eyes of a child in a disfigured face smiled, not the smile of a beggar, but that of a rich person, who could pay his debt of grat itude

"Mummy!" the boy suddenly cried out, sitting up with a start "They're crawling! Quick, Mummy!"

"He's been dreaming," she said to me, bending over her son

I went out into the yard and stood there, sunk in thought From the open window of the basement flowed a loud song, a mother's lullaby to her son It was sung in gay snuffling tones and the strange words were clearly enun ciated

The Creepy-Crawlies came again,
With all the misery and all the pain,

Miseries without number,
To tear the heart asunder!
Woe's me, woe's me!
Whither shall we flee?

I left the yard quickly, grinding my teeth to keep from howling

1917

It was then that fate, with the sole purpose of completing my education, made me undergo the searing experience of first love which had both tragic and comic features.

Some friends of mine had arranged to go boating on the Oka River and had delegated me to invite X. and his wife, a couple who had recently returned from France and whom I had not yet met. I visited them in the evening.

They lived in the basement of an old house. In front of it, stretching from one side of the street to the other, was a puddle that remained there all spring and most of the summer. The crows and dogs used it as a looking-glass, the pigs as a bath.

So engrossed was I in my thoughts that I slipped and crashed into the door like a landslide, causing a strange dismay. I was received ungraciously by a fattish man of middle height with a bushy brown beard and kindly blue eyes, who stood in my way screening the doorway into the room behind him.

Pulling his clothes into place, he said curtly: "What can I do for you?" adding in rebuke: "Before entering a house one usually knocks at the door."

In the shadows of the room behind him I could see something like a big white bird fluttering about, and a clear bright voice said:

"Especially if it's a married couple you've come to see."

I asked with annoyance if they were the people I was looking for, and when the man, who looked like a prosperous tradesman, assured me they were, I explained the purpose of my visit.

"You say Clark has sent you?" repeated the man, stroking his beard solemnly. Suddenly he cried out, "Ouch!

Olga!" and whirled round, clutching that part of the anatomy which, being located below the small of the back, is not mentioned in polite society I had the impression he had been pinched

His place in the doorway was taken by a slim girl who gazed at me with smiling blue eyes

"Who are you? A policeman?"

"Oh, no It's just my trousers," I replied politely

She laughed, but I did not take offence because the sparkle in her eyes was just what I had long been looking for Evidently it was my clothes that had made her laugh I was wearing the full trousers of a policeman and the white jacket of a cook This latter is a most convenient article of attire, substituting as it does for a suit coat and buttoning up to the throat so that no shirt is required underneath Borrowed hunting boots and a wide brimmed hat of the kind worn by Italian banditti were effective finishing touches

She pulled me by the sleeve into the room and pushed me towards the table

"Why are you wearing such freakish clothes?" she asked

"Why do you call them freakish?"

"Come, don't be angry," she said appeasingly

What an odd girl! How could anyone be angry with her?

The man with the beard was sitting on the bed rolling a cigarette

Indicating him with my eyes I asked

"Is he your father or your brother?"

"Her husband," he said deliberately And she asked, laughing "Why?"

"Forgive me," I said after a moment's scrutiny of her face

We went on making disconnected remarks for another five minutes or so, but I felt at ease and would willingly have sat in that basement room for five hours, or days, or years, for the pleasure of gazing at her fair oval face and gentle eyes The lower lip of her small mouth was fuller than the

upper one, giving the impression of being swollen a little Her thick brown hair was clipped short and formed a fluffy cap upon her head, curling about her shell like ears and pink cheeks Her hands and arms were lovely, I had seen them bared to the elbow as she had stood in the doorway holding on to the jamb She was dressed very simply, in a white shirtwaist, with full sleeves and lace trimmings, and a well fitting white skirt But the most remarkable feature about her was her eyes What joy, sympathy, and friendly curiosity they radiated! And what is more, they were lighted by just the sort of smile (there could be no doubt about it!) a young man of twenty craves for, especially if his heart has been bruised by rough handling

"It's about to rain," announced her husband, exhaling a cloud of smoke into his beard

I glanced out of the window The sky was clear and studded with stars I took the hint and went away, but I was filled with the quiet joy of one who has found what he has long sought for

All night long I wandered through the fields, ruminating upon the tender shine of those blue eyes By morning I had convinced myself that that burly creature with the beard and the contented look of a well fed cat was no husband for her Indeed, I was filled with pity for her, poor dear! To think of having to live with a man who wore bread crumbs in his beard!

The next day we went boating on the murky Oka under a high embankment streaked by layers of varicoloured marl The day was the finest since the creation of the world The sun blazed in a festive sky, the fragrance of ripe strawberries was wafted over the river, people were aware of their own goodness and this filled me with joy and love for them Even the husband of my adored turned out to be a fine chap he did not get into the boat in which his wife sat and which I rowed He behaved admirably all day First he told us interesting stories about Gladstone, then he drank a jug of excellent milk, stretched himself out under a tree, and slept like a child until nightfall

Naturally our boat arrived first at the picnic site, and when I carried my lady out she said:

"How strong you are!"

I felt capable of overturning the highest steeple and told her it would cost me no effort to carry her all the way back to town (which was a good seven versts). I can't say I'm sure I could actually have performed the feat. She laughed softly and caressed me with her eyes. All day long I was conscious of the shine in her eyes, and, of course, I was certain they shone only for me.

Matters developed with a rapidity that was not strange when you consider that the young woman had never before seen an animal so extraordinary, and that the animal was pining for a woman's tenderness.

Soon I learned that, despite her youthful appearance, she was ten years my elder, had graduated from a School of Young Women of the Nobility in Belostok, had been engaged to the Commandant of the Winter Palace in Petersburg, had lived in Paris, and had studied both painting and obstetrics. Later it turned out that her mother, too, had been an obstetrician and had been responsible for bringing me into the world. I took this fact as a good omen and rejoiced in it.

Her association with Bohemians and political émigrés, the liaison she had formed with one of the latter, the half-starved, half-vagrant life they had led in the basements and attics of Paris, Petersburg, and Vienna, had given her an amusingly inconsistent but exceptionally interesting personality. She was as pert as a tomtit, observed life and people with the curiosity of a clever schoolgirl, sang French songs with spirit, smoked cigarettes gracefully, drew skilfully, showed some talent as an actress, and was expert in making clothes and hats. The one thing she did not practise was obstetrics.

"I have had only four patients in my life and seventy-five per cent of them died," she said.

This was enough to make her lose all taste for aiding indirectly the population increase. As for direct aid, a

charming four-year-old daughter testified to her high qualifications in this field. She spoke about herself as of someone she knew intimately and had grown a bit bored with. But at times it was as if she caused herself astonishment: her eyes would grow beautifully dark and a faint smile of embarrassment would glimmer in their depths. Shy children smile in the same way.

I was aware of her quick keen mind, I realised she was vastly superior to me in education, and was struck by the amiable condescension with which she regarded her fellow-creatures. She was infinitely more interesting than any other girl or woman I had ever met. The casual way in which she told a story impressed me and led me to believe that in addition to knowing all that my revolutionary-minded friends knew, she was in possession of other knowledge, higher and more precious, that caused her to watch everything from a distance, as a bystander, wearing the smile a grownup wears when watching the amusing, if risky, play of children.

The basement quarters in which she lived consisted of two rooms: a small kitchen which served as an entrance-hall as well, and a big room with three windows facing the street and two looking out on a dirty refuse-strewn yard. Doubtless they could have made convenient quarters for a cobbler, but not for an elegant lady who had lived in Paris, the sacred city of the Great Revolution, of Molière, Beaumarchais, Hugo, and others of their kind. There were many other incongruities between the picture and the frame, all of which irritated me and evoked, among other sentiments, a feeling of compassion for this woman. Yet she herself seemed to be oblivious of things which I felt she should have found deeply offensive.

She was busy from morning to night. In the morning she worked as cook and chamber-maid, then she sat down at the big table under the windows and made pencil portraits from photographs of prosperous townsmen, or drew maps and coloured them, or helped her husband compile books on rural statistics. The dust of the street drifted down through

the open window upon her head and the table, and the legs of passers by threw thick shadows across her papers She sang as she worked and when she grew tired of sitting would get up and waltz with a chair or play with her child Despite all the dirty work she did, she was always as neat and clean as a kitten

Her husband was lazy and good natured He was given to reading French novels in bed, especially the novels of Dumas *pere.* "They sweep the dust out of your brain cells," he would say He viewed life "from a purely scientific point of view", called dinner "the absorbing of nourishment", and having dined, would say

"In order to transfer food from the stomach to the body cells the organism must be in a state of absolute repose "

And so he would climb into bed without so much as shaking the crumbs out of his beard, read Dumas or de Montepin for a few minutes, and for the next two hours snore blissfully, causing his soft moustache to stir as if invisible insects were crawling in it On waking up he would stare ponderously at the cracks in the ceiling for a while and at last come out with

"Kuzma gave a wrong interpretation of Parnell's ideas last night "

And soon thereafter he would set out for Kuzma's with the purpose of putting him right, saying to his wife in parting

"Finish calculating the data from the Maidan Volost for me, that's a dear I'll be back soon "

At midnight or later he would come home in high spirits

"Didn't I give it to Kuzma, just! He's got a good memory for facts, drat him, but so have I By the way, he doesn't understand the first thing about Gladstone's eastern policy "

He was always talking about Binet, Richet, and mental hygiene, and when he was kept indoors by rain he would undertake the education of his wife's little girl, who had been born by chance somewhere along the road between two love affairs

"You must chew your food thoroughly, Lolya, that aids digestion by accelerating the transformation of food into a conglomerate of chemical elements easily absorbed "

After dinner, when he had reduced his organism to a state of "absolute repose", he would take the child to bed with him and say, by way of telling her a story

"And so when the vain and blood thirsty Napoleon usurped power "

His lectures sent his wife into convulsions of laughter but he did not mind he was asleep before he had time to take offence After playing with his silky beard awhile, the little girl would curl up and fall asleep too I became great friends with her She enjoyed the stories I told her more than Boleslav's lectures on the blood thirsty usurper and his unfortunate Josephine My success made Boleslav amusing ly jealous

"I object, Peshkov! Before a child is brought into contact with life itself it must be taught the basic principles underlying it Too bad you don't know English so that you could read *Mental Hygiene for Children.* "

He himself, I suspect, knew only one word of English "Good bye "

He was twice my age but as inquisitive as a young poodle He liked to gossip and create the impression of knowing all the secrets of foreign as well as Russian revolutionary circles Perhaps he really did know them, for he was always being visited by mysterious strangers who behaved as if they were great tragedians forced for the moment to play the part of simpletons It was at his house I met the revolutionary Sabunayev who, being in hiding from the police, wore an ill fitting red wig and a gaudy suit that was comically tight for him

One day when I arrived I caught sight of a perky little man with a small head who looked like a hairdresser He was wearing checked trousers, a grey jacket, and squeaky shoes Boleslav pushed me into the kitchen and whispered

"He's just come from Paris with important information He's got to see Korolenko, be so kind as to arrange it "

I tried to, but it turned out that Korolenko had had the man pointed out to him in the street and so he said to me in no uncertain terms

"No, thank you, I will have nothing to do with that fop!"

Boleslav took this as an insult both to the Parisian and the "cause" He spent the next two days composing a letter to Korolenko, couching his protest now in terms of wrathful denunciation, now in a tone of gentle rebuke, and at last consigning all his epistolary efforts to the stove Soon after this a series of arrests were made in Moscow, Nizhny Novgorod, and Vladimir, and it turned out that the man in the checked trousers was none other than the famous Landezen Garting, the first police agent I had ever set eyes upon

But taken all in all the husband of my beloved was a good sort, a little sentimental and with a comic streak supplied by the "scientific baggage" he was burdened with He himself used to say

"An intellectual's only excuse for living is to accumulate scientific knowledge which he can then distribute among the masses with no thought of personal gain "

My attachment deepened and caused me acute suffering As I sat in the basement watching my beloved bending over her work table I became possessed of a dark longing to pick her up in my arms and carry her away from that accursed room stuffed with furniture the big double bed, the heavy old fashioned divan on which the child slept, the tables piled high with dusty books and papers The legs of passers-by flashed past the windows absurdly, from time to time a homeless dog thrust its muzzle in, gusts of wind brought the stench of dust heated by the sun Inside the room stuffy air, the girlish figure at the table, her quiet singing, the scrape of her pen or pencil, the smile of her cornflower blue eyes lifted for a moment to mine I loved her to distraction and pitied her to despair

"Tell me some more about yourself," she once said

I began to tell her, but in a few moments she interrupted me

"It's not about yourself you're talking "

I realised only too well that what I was saying was not about myself, but about someone I have confused myself with

I had yet to find my real self in the chaos of my impressions and adventures So far I had been unable, even afraid, to do so Who and what was I? The question baffled me I was bitter against life, it had already driven me to a humiliating attempt at suicide I did not understand people and found the lives they led to be stupid, low, and meaningless A cultivated curiosity made me peer into all the dark corners of existence, into all the mysteries of life, and at time I felt myself capable of committing a crime out of sheer curiosity capable of committing murder just to see how I would feel afterwards

I feared that if I found my true self my beloved would behold a revolting creature caught in a fine mesh of preposterous thoughts and feelings, a ghoulish creature who would frighten and repel her I felt I had to do something about myself I was certain that she would be able to help me and even to weave a magic spell which would liberate me from the dark impressions of the life around me Then my soul would burst into a flame of surpassing strength and joy

The casual tone in which she spoke of herself and the condescending attitude she showed to others led me to believe that she was in possession of some extraordinary knowledge, that she held in her hand the key to all of life's mysteries, and that was why she was always so gay and sure of herself Perhaps I loved her most for what I least comprehended, but the fact was that I loved her with all the power and passion of youth It was anguish for me to suppress a passion that consumed and exhausted me physically A simpler, cruder acceptance of it would have eased my sufferings, but I believed that the relationship between a man and a woman was something greater than

the mere physical union which I knew in its bestial form, in that form it inspired me almost with loathing, even though I was a strong and fairly sensual youth with an imagination that was easily fired

How I should have become possessed of this romantic dream is more than I can say, but unwavering was my faith in something beyond all that I knew, something that contained within it the lofty and mysterious meaning of a man's relations with a woman, something great, joyful, even terrible, to be revealed in the first embrace, and I believed that he who experienced this great joy would be trans formed for ever

It seems to me that I did not get these fancies from the books I read, I cultivated them just to be perverse, for, as I said in an early poem of mine, "I've come into this world to disagree "

Furthermore, I had a strange and haunting memory somewhere beyond the bounds of reality, some time in my earliest existence, I had experienced a great spiritual perturbation, a sweet trepidation, or rather a foretaste of harmony, a joy more bright than the sun in its rising Perhaps it was while I was still in my mother's womb that the nervous energy of some great joy she experienced was communicated to me in a fiery flash that gave my soul birth, ignited it to life, and perhaps that stunning moment of my mother's rapture launched me in life with a latent and quivering expectation of something extraordinary to be had of woman

What a man does not know, he imagines And the wisest of all the things he has learned to do is to love a woman and worship her beauty All that is loveliest in the world has been born of his love of woman

One day while bathing in the river I dived off the stern of a barge, struck my chest against the anchor-chain and caught my foot in it There I hung, head-down in the water, until a carter pulled me out They pumped the water out of

me, scraping my skin badly I was sick and spat blood and was made to go to bed and suck ice

My beloved came to see me She sat down beside my bed and asked how it had happened, smoothing my forehead with her dear hand and gazing at me with dark unquiet eyes

I asked her if she couldn't see that I loved her

"Yes," she said with a wary smile "I see, and that is too bad, though I love you too "

At her words the earth leaped up and the trees in the garden reeled with joy I was struck dumb with rapture and astonishment, I buried my head in her lap, and if I had not held on to her tightly I must surely have gone sailing through the window like a soap bubble

"Don't move, it is bad for you," she said sternly, trying to put my head back on the pillow "And if you don't calm yourself I will go home What a mad fellow you are! I never knew anyone like you! As to us and our feelings we'll talk about them when you get better "

She spoke with complete composure and the smile in her glowing eyes was inexpressibly tender Soon she went away, leaving me radiant with hope and filled with the confidence that with her help I would soar into a realm of new thoughts and feelings

A few days later we were sitting in a field at the edge of a gully outside of town The wind rustled the bushes down below A grey sky threatened rain In drab, practical words she pointed out to me the difference in our ages, saying I had to begin studying and that it was too soon for me to burden myself with a wife and child These dismal truths, spoken in the tone of a mother to her child, succeeded only in making me love and respect her the more It was both sad and sweet to listen to her voice and her tender words Never before had anyone spoken to me in such a way

I glanced down into the yawning gully where the bushes, swept by the wind, were like a swift moving green river, and in my heart of hearts I vowed to repay her for the affection she showed me by giving her my whole soul

"We must think well before making any decision," I

heard her say softly She was slapping her knees with a hickory wand as she sat gazing in the direction of the town, which was buried in the green of its orchards

"And naturally I must speak to Boleslav, he already suspects something and is fidgety I don't like scenes "

It was all very sad and beautiful, but, as it turned out, there had to be a comic and vulgar touch to it

My trousers were too wide for me at the waist and I had pinned them together with a brass pin some three inches long (such pins are not made any more, fortunately for impecunious lovers) The pin kept scratching me, and once when I made a careless movement it plunged into my side I managed to extract it, but to my horror I felt the blood come spurting out of the wound, wetting my trousers I had on no underwear and the cook's jacket came only to my waist How was I to get up and walk away in wet trousers that clung to my legs?

Aware of the absurdity of the accident and angry that it should have taken such a burlesque form, I began to talk excitedly in the unnatural voice of an actor who has forgotten his lines

She listened to me for a while, at first attentively, then with obvious perplexity

"What high sounding phrases!" she said "It doesn't sound like you at all "

That was the last straw, I shut up like a clam

"Time to go home, it's going to rain "

"I'm staying here "

"Why?"

What could I say?

"Are you angry with me?" she asked, peering tenderly into my eyes

"Oh, no! With myself "

"You mustn't be angry with yourself either," she said, getting up

I could not move As I sat there in that warm puddle I fancied the blood was pouring out of my side with a noise she could not fail to detect, and that presently she would ask

"What's that?"

"Go away," I mentally beseeched her

She generously bestowed on me a few more tender words, then turned and walked away along the edge of the gully, swaying gently on her lovely legs I watched her slim form diminish until she was out of sight, then I threw myself down on the ground, crushed by the certainty that this, my first love, would turn out unhappily

And so it did Her husband shed tears and mumbled a lot of sentimental drivel and she could not make up her mind to swim to my side across that treacly stream

"He's so helpless and you're so strong!" she said to me with tears in her eyes "He says if I leave him he'll wither like a flower without the sun "

I guffawed at the recollection of the stumpy legs, womanish hips, and melon shaped belly of the "flower" He had flies in his beard they always found something to feed on there

She smiled

"It *was* a ridiculous thing to say," she admitted, "but it really is hard for him "

"And for me, too "

"Oh, but you're young and strong!"

For the first time in my life I felt that I was an enemy of the weak Later on I was often to observe, in more serious circumstances, how tragically helpless the strong are when hemmed in by the weak, and how much precious energy of heart and mind is wasted on preserving the barren existence of those intended by Nature to perish

Soon after that, half ill and on the verge of insanity, I left the town and for nearly two years tramped the roads of Russia I traversed the valleys of the Volga and the Don, wandered through the Ukraine, the Crimea, and the Caucasus, absorbed countless impressions, had all sorts of adventures, and became coarser and more resentful than ever, yet deep in my heart I preserved the image of this woman, though I met others who were better and wiser than she

And when one autumn day in Tiflis more than two years later I was told she had again come back from Paris and was delighted to hear that I was in the same town, I fainted for the first time in my life, strong twenty three year-old youth that I was

Perhaps I would never have found the courage to go and see her if she had not sent me an invitation through one of her friends

I found her more lovely and charming than ever She had the same girlish figure, the same delicate colouring, the same tender shine in her blue eyes Her husband had remained in France, she had come alone with her daughter, a child as lively and graceful as a doe

A thunderstorm was raging when I went to see her, the air was noisy with the downpour, rivers of rain streamed off Mount St David, rushing through the streets with a force that tore up the cobblestones The house was shaken by the roar of the wind, the angry plash of the water, and the bang and crash of destruction The windowpanes rattled, the room was continually lighted up by livid flashes, and everything seemed to be plunging down into a bottomless pit

The frightened child buried her head in the bed-clothes, we stood at the window blinded by the lightning and speaking for some reason in a whisper

"I've never before seen such a storm," came the words of my beloved

Suddenly she asked, "Well, have you got over your feeling for me?"

"No "

She showed surprise and said in the same whisper

"Goodness, how you've changed! You're an entirely different person!"

Slowly she sank into an armchair beside the window, started and frowned as a particularly vivid sheet of lightning flashed, and said

"There's a lot of talk about you What brought you here? Tell me about yourself "

God! How tiny and wonderful she was!

I talked until midnight, as if making confession to her Nature in its grimmer aspects always excites me and makes me wildly jubilant. I must have spoken well, judging by the strained attention with which she listened and the fixed glance of her wide-open eyes She only whispered from time to time

"How really awful!"

On taking leave I noticed she said good bye without the patronising smile of an elder to a younger that in former days had always vexed me I walked down the wet streets watching the sharp sickle of the moon mow down the clouds, my head spinning with happiness The next day I sent her the following poem by post (she recited it so often afterwards that it stuck in my memory)

My lady!
A tender word, a gentle glance,
suffice to make an humble slave
of this magician,
fine skilled in the art of transforming
trifles, nothings,
into little joys.

Accept unto yourself this slave!
Perhaps he will transform little joys
into a great happiness
Was not the great world created
of tiny particles of matter?

A none too jolly world I do confess,
a world of rare and meagre joys,
and yet it has its comic side
your humble slave, for instance,
and a lovely side as well
who lovelier than you?

But stay!

Can the blunt nails of words
fix the ethereal loveliness of you
fairest of earth's few flowers?

This, of course, can hardly be called a poem, but it was written with jocular sincerity

And so here I am, once more sitting opposite the most wonderful person in the world one I cannot live without She is wearing a blue gown which falls about her in soft folds without hiding the graceful outlines of her form She speaks in words that are new to me as she sits playing with the tassels of her belt, and I watch the movement of her slender fingers tipped by pink nails and fancy I am like a violin being tuned by a skilful and loving musician I long to die, I long to breathe this woman into my soul so that she will remain with me for ever My body is taut and aching with strain and it seems as if my heart must burst

I read my first story to her (it had just been published) but I don't remember what she thought of it I seem to remember her saying in surprise

"So you've turned to writing prose!" and then, as in a dream "I've thought of you a lot during these two years Can it really be that you have undergone all these hardships for my sake?"

I murmured something about there being no hardships in a world in which she lived

"How nice you are "

I longed desperately to embrace her, but I had such idiotically long arms and big hands that I dared not touch her for fear of hurting her And so there I stood, swaying to the throbbing of my heart and murmuring

"Come and live with me, I implore you to live with me!"

She laughed softly and with some embarrassment, and her dear eyes were blindingly bright She withdrew into a corner of the room and said from there

"This is what we'll do you go back to Nizhny Novgorod and I'll stay here and think it over, then I'll write to you "

Bowing respectfully, like a hero out of one of the novels I had read, I walked away on air

That winter she and her daughter joined me in Nizhny Novgorod

"Even the nights are short when a poor man marries," is the sad wisdom of a Russian folk saying My own experience taught me the truth of it

For two rubles a month we rented a whole house the bath house in a priest's back yard I occupied the entry and my wife moved into the bath house itself, which served us as drawing room too The building was hardly suited to family life ice formed in the corners and along the seams I worked mostly at night, wrapped up in all the clothes I owned with a carpet on top, and even so I caught a bad case of rheumatism most unexpected considering the hardi ness I took such pride in at that time

The bath room itself was warmer, but whenever I made a fire in the stove the rooms reeked of soap, steamed birch leaves, and rotting wood This made the little girl (a porcelain doll with beautiful eyes) grow nervous and get a headache

In the spring spiders and wood lice made their home in the bath house Mother and daughter nearly fainted at the sight of them and I had to swat them with a galosh Our tiny windows were overgrown with wild elder-berry and raspber ry bushes, which kept the rooms in a state of twilight, but the drunken and capricious priest would not allow me to uproot or even clip them

We could, of course, have found more convenient quarters, but we owed the priest money and he was so fond of me he would not let me go

"You'll get used to it," he would say "And if not, pay me my money and go wherever you like you can live with the English for all I care "

He hated the English

"They're a lazy lot, never invented anything but solitaire and don't know how to fight," he asserted

He was an enormous creature with a round red face and a big red beard, and he drank so much that he could no longer conduct services in the church. He suffered unspeakably for love of a little, sharp-nosed, black-haired seamstress who looked like a jack-daw.

He would slap the tears out of his beard with the palm of his hand as he told me about the tricks she played on him:

"I know she's a harpy but she reminds me of Phimiama the Martyr and that's why I love her."

I looked for that particular martyr in the *Lives of the Saints* but could not find her.

Indignant that I should be a non-believer, he tried to stir my soul by exhorting me in the following way:

"Take a practical view of it, son: there's millions of believers and only a dozen or so non-believers. Why's that? Because a soul without the church is like a fish without water. See? Let's have a drink on it."

"I don't drink—bad for my rheumatism."

Spearing a piece of herring with his fork, he brandished it over his head and said threateningly:

"And that, too, is because you've got no faith."

I could not sleep nights for the shame of having my beloved live in that bath-house, of often having no money to buy meat for dinner or a toy for the child, of all my accursed poverty. I myself was not embarrassed by poverty, but it was humiliating and calamitous that this well-bred elegant young woman, and especially her little girl, should have to endure it.

At night as I sat at my table in the corner copying legal documents or writing stories I would grit my teeth and curse myself, my love, my fate, and people in general.

My beloved was magnanimous; she was like a mother who does not want her son to see how hard life is for her. Not once did a complaint escape her lips; the harder our conditions, the brighter her voice, the gayer her laughter. From morning to night she drew portraits of priests and their dead wives and made maps of the district. For these maps the local administration was once awarded a gold

medal at an exhibition. When orders for portraits were no longer forthcoming she made fashionable Parisian hats for the women in our street out of bits of silk, straw, and wire. I was no judge of ladies' hats, but her fantastic creations must have been highly amusing, for she choked with laughter whenever she tried them on in front of the looking-glass. And they had a strange effect on their wearers, who stuck out their bellies with a particularly proud air as they strutted down the street with her birds' nests perched on their heads.

I worked as a lawyer's clerk and wrote stories for the local newspaper, receiving two kopecks a line for my creative efforts. If we had no guests for tea in the evening my wife would amuse me by telling me stories of her school days. Alexander II, it seems, had paid frequent visits to the boarding-school in Belostok. He had treated the young ladies to sweets which in some miraculous way made some of them pregnant, and from time to time one or another of the prettiest of the girls accompanied him on hunting trips to the Belovezhskaya Reservation and then went straight to Petersburg to be married.

She told me lots of interesting things about Paris; I had already learned something about it through my reading, especially of the weighty volume written by Maxime Du Camp. She had learned to know Paris in the cafés of Montmartre and by living the wild life of the Latin Quarter. I found her stories more stimulating than wine and I wrote paeans to women, convinced that all the beauty in the world was inspired by love of them.

Most of all I enjoyed hearing about her own love affairs—she told about them in a fascinating way and with a candour that sometimes caused me embarrassment. Laughingly, her words like light pencil strokes, she sketched for me a picture of the general to whom she had been engaged. Once during a royal hunting party he had shot an aurochs without giving the Tsar the opportunity to do so first, then had cried to the wounded beast: "Forgive me, Your Majesty!"

She told me about Russian political émigres, and as she spoke I always fancied there was a smile of condescension on her lips At times her sincerity led her to become naively cynical, she would run the pink tip of her tongue over her lips like a kitten and a peculiar light would shine in her eyes, sometimes she showed disgust But mostly she was like a little girl absorbed in playing dolls

One day she said to me

"When a Russian is in love he becomes talkative and boring sometimes even objectionably eloquent The French are the only ones who know how to make love For them love is almost a religion "

After that I involuntarily became more restrained with her and more solicitous

She said about French women

"Their hearts are not always passionately tender, but in place of this they offer a carefully cultivated sensuality Love for them is an art "

Her tone was grave and instructive as she told me this It was not the knowledge I was most in need of, but it was knowledge nonetheless, and I drank it in eagerly

"The difference between Russian and French women is probably the same as the difference between fruit and fruit flavoured sweetmeats," she said one moonlit night.

She herself was a sweetmeat I greatly astonished her during the first days of our life together by ardently expounding my romantic views on the relations between men and women

"Are you serious? Do you really think that?" she had asked as she lay in my arms bathed in blue moonlight Her pale flesh was transparent and gave off the heady fragrance of almonds Her slender fingers played absent mindedly with my hair and there was an incredulous smile on her lips as she gazed at me with wide and unquiet eyes

"Good heavens!" she exclaimed, leaping down on to the floor and pacing backwards and forwards, from light into shadow, her fair skin gleaming like satin when the moonbeams fell on it, her bare feet noiselessly touching the

floor boards She came back to me and put her hands on my cheeks as she said in a maternal tone

"Your first experience should have been with an innocent girl yes it should! Not with me "

When I picked her up in my arms she began to weep

"You do realise how much I love you, don't you?" she asked softly "I have never been so happy with anybody as I am with you that is the truth and you must believe me I never loved anybody else so tenderly and with such a light heart You can't even imagine how good it is to be with you! And yet I say we have made a mistake I am not the right woman for you not for you I have made a mistake "

I did not understand her Her words frightened me and I hastened to smother her mood in joyous endearments But her odd words stuck in my memory A few days later she again said, with ecstatic tears

"Ah, if only you were my first love!"

I remember it being a stormy night, the elder berry branches beat against the windowpanes, the wind howled in the chimney, the room was dark and cold and filled with the rustle of torn wallpaper

Whenever we had a few extra rubles we would invite our friends to a fine supper meat, vodka and beer, pastries, and all sorts of good things My Parisian had an excellent appetite and a weakness for Russan food *sychug* (cow's maw stuffed with buckwheat and goose fat), pies with sheat fish filling, mutton and potato soup

She founded the "Order of Bursting Bellies" with a membership of a dozen or so friends who enjoyed hearty meals and good drink, had a fine knowledge of the culinary art, and could discourse on it eloquently and indefatigably I was interested in art of another sort I ate little and took little enjoyment in the process of feeding it was not included in my aesthetic requirements

"Empty sacks," was what I once called the Brothers of the Bursting Bellies

"Anybody's empty if you give him a good shaking," she retorted "Heine once said 'We're all naked underneath our clothes'"

She knew a lot of cynical quotations, but it seemed to me she did not always apply them aptly

She was fond of "giving a good shaking" to members of the male sex and was very skilful at it Her wit and gaiety enabled her to make things lively wherever she was and she roused emotions that were not of the highest order After talking to her for but a few moments a man's ears would turn red, then purple, his eyes would grow hazy, and he would gaze at her like a goat at a cabbage patch

"A magnetic woman," observed the notary's assistant, a seedy nobleman with warts on his face and a belly the size of a church dome

A fair haired student from Yaroslavl wrote poetry to her always in dactyls I found the poetry loathsome but it made her laugh till the tears came

"Why do you stir them up?" I once asked her

"It's just as good sport as fishing," she said "It's called flirting, and there's not a self respecting woman in the world who doesn't enjoy it"

Sometimes she would peer slyly into my eyes and ask "Jealous?"

No, I was not jealous, but I was annoyed I could not bear vulgarity Jovial by nature, I realised that the ability to laugh was one of man's highest gifts I despised circus clowns and stage comedians, sure that I could easily outdo them Often I made our guests laugh till their sides ached

"You'd make a marvellous comedian!" she once said "You ought to go on the stage, really you ought"

She herself acted successfully in amateur performances and had had offers from professional producers

"I love the stage, but I'm afraid of the backstage," she said

She was truthful in thought, word, and desire

"You philosophise too much," she would say to me "Life in its essence is crude and simple There's no sense in

complicating it by searching for hidden meanings the only thing one can do is try to make it less crude No one can do more "

I felt there was too much gynaecology in her philosophy, and *A Course in Obstetrics* was her Bible She herself told me what a shock she had got when, on leaving the girls' school, she had read her first scientific book

"I had been so very innocent that it was like being hit over the head with a bat I came plunging down out of the clouds into the mud, and I wept for the faith I had lost But soon I felt that the ground under my feet was firm, if rough The thing I wept for most was God I had felt so very close to Him, and all of a sudden He dissolved in thin air, like cigarette smoke, and with Him went my exalted dreams of love How much we had thought, how beautifully we had talked about love at school!"

I was repelled by her nihilism a mixture of a school girl's naivete and Parisian worldliness Sometimes I would get up from my desk at night and go to look at her She looked even smaller, more dainty, and beautiful in bed, and as I stood gazing down at her I would bitterly regret the vicissitudes of life that had warped her soul My pity for her only strengthened my love

Our literary tastes were quite different I was an admirer of Balzac and Flaubert, she preferred Paul Féval, Octave Feuillet, and Paul de Kock She was especially fond of the novel *Young Giraud, My Wife,* which she considered one of the wittiest she had ever read, I found it as boring as the criminal code Despite this we got on well, did not become bored with each other or stop loving each other But in the third year of our life together I became aware of something ominous stirring within me and stirring with growing insistence I was reading and studying intensively at the time and had begun to take my writing seriously Our numerous guests interfered with my work Most of them were uninteresting people, and their numbers had increased as an increase in our earnings made it possible for us to give dinners and suppers more frequently

Life for her was a sort of panopticon, and since the men wore no sign reading "Hands off!" she would sometimes go too close to them and they would interpret this to their own advantage Misunderstandings resulted which I was obliged to clear up I was sometimes too impulsive, I was always inept, I remember a gentleman, whose ears I tweaked, complaining

"Very well, I admit being at fault, but what right had he to tweak my ears? I'm not a schoolboy! I'm almost twice his age, and he goes tweaking my ears! A punch in the jaw would have been more dignified "

Apparently I was not versed in the art of dealing punishment appropriate to the offender's sense of dignity

My wife did not take my stories very seriously, but at first I did not mind this I myself did not believe that I would ever become a writer True, I did experience moments of inspiration, but on the whole I looked upon my newspaper work as merely a means of gaining a livelihood One morning I read *Old Izergil*, the fruits of my nights' labours, to her She fell fast asleep I was not offended at first I stopped reading and gazed at her thoughtfully The head I loved so dearly had dropped against the back of the rickety sofa, her lips were parted, and she was breathing as softly and evenly as an infant. The morning sun came peering through the elder berry boughs at the window, scattering golden patches like transparent flowers over her breast and knees

I got up and went out into the garden, now deeply hurt and filled with doubts as to my own literary powers

Never in my life had I seen a woman who was not steeped either in dirt, lechery, poverty, and slavish labour, or in stuffy, vulgar, overfed self-complacency Childhood had given to me only one lovely vision that of Queen Margot, but a whole mountain range of other impressions separated me from her I had supposed that women would rejoice in the story of Izergil's life, that it would rouse in them a longing for freedom and beauty and here was the woman I loved best sleeping

Why? Perhaps the instrument life had put into my hands was inadequate?

This woman occupied the place of a mother in my heart. I had hoped and believed that she would be able to stimulate my creative powers, and that under her influence the edge would be taken off the roughness life had developed in me.

That was thirty years ago, and the remembrance draws a smile to my lips today. But at that time her indisputable right to sleep when she felt sleepy caused me considerable pain.

I believed that sadness could be dispelled by talking about it in tones of levity. And I also suspected that someone who enjoyed human suffering was interfering in human affairs: an evil spirit that concocted family dramas and ruined people's lives. I looked upon this invisible demon as my personal enemy and did everything in my power to avoid his traps.

I remember that on reading (in Oldenburg's *Buddha, His Teachings and Followers)* the phrase "all existence is suffering", I deeply resented it. I had not seen much joy in life, but I felt that its suffering was fortuitous, not inevitable. And after a careful perusal of Bishop Chrisanth's *Religion of the Orient* I was even more deeply convinced that nothing could be more alien to my nature than a teaching that made sorrow, fear, and suffering the foundations of all life. After living through an intense period of religious ecstasy, I came to realise the humiliating futility of such emotion. Suffering became so repellent to me that I hated any sort of drama and learned to skilfully convert drama into comedy.

Perhaps it is unnecessary to go into all this merely for the purpose of saying that a "family drama" was developing in our house, and that both of us were doing our best to prevent it. I have allowed myself this philosophical digression in order to retrace the tortuous path I traversed in the search for my true self.

My wife's innate cheerfulness made it impossible for her to play at drama—a game so many of "psychologising" Russians of both sexes thoroughly enjoy in their homes.

And yet the dreary dactyls of the fair-haired student affected her like autumn rain. He covered sheet after sheet of note-paper with poems inscribed in a beautiful round hand, and thrust them between the leaves of books, inside of hats, and even in the sugar-bowl. Whenever I found such a neatly folded sheet I would hand it to my wife and say:

"Accept this latest attempt to melt your heart!"

At first Cupid's paper arrows made no impression on her; she would read the poems to me and together we would laugh over such lines as:

Ever, forever, I live but for you,
All other pleasures I gladly eschew..
Live but to bask in the warmth that you shed,
Watch every movement, each turn of your head,
Hover, a falcon, above your sweet bed....

But one day after another such declaration on the part of the student she said pensively:

"I do feel sorry for him."

To which I replied that it was not for *him* I felt sorry. After that she stopped reading his poems to me.

The poet, a stocky young man four years older than me, was taciturn, persistent, and given to drink. On Sundays he would come to dinner at two o'clock in the afternoon and stay there, silent and motionless, until two o'clock in the morning. He, like myself, was a lawyer's clerk. The extent of his absent-mindedness caused his good-natured employer great astonishment. He was, in addition, careless in the fulfilment of his duties and often remarked in a hoarse voice:

"It's all a lot of nonsense."

"What then is not nonsense?"

"Hm ... how shall I put it?" he would reply ruminatively, raising his languid grey eyes to the ceiling. He never discovered how to put it.

He affected a boredom that irritated me more than anything else. He consumed a lot of drink but got drunk slowly, and he kept giving contemptuous little snorts when

he was drunk Apart from these negative traits I could see nothing remarkable in him, for there is a law by which a man is bound to see only the bad in one who pays court to his wife

A rich relative in the Ukraine sent him fifty rubles a month a lot of money in those days On Sundays and holidays he always brought my wife chocolates and on her birthday presented her with a bronze alarm-clock represent ing a stump on which an owl was killing a grass-snake This odious mechanism always woke me up an hour and seven minutes ahead of time

My wife stopped flirting with the student and began treating him with the tenderness of a woman who feels responsible for having upset a man's emotional equilibri um I asked her how she supposed this sad affair would end

"I don't know," she said "I have no definite feeling for him but I want to give him a shaking up Something seems to slumber in him and I may be able to awaken it "

She was undoubtedly telling the truth She was always wanting to wake up somebody, and succeeded admirably in doing so But the thing she usually woke up was the beast in men I told her the story of Circe, but this did no good, and little by little I found myself surrounded by bulls, bucks, and pigs

My acquaintances told me hair raising tales about her doings, but I repaid them for their trouble by being savagely rude

"I'll give you a thrashing for such talk!" I would say

Some of them retracted ignominiously, others took offence

"You'll never accomplish anything by being rude," my wife said to me "They'll only spread worse tales Surely you aren't jealous, are you?"

No, I was too young and self-confident to be jealous But there are certain thoughts, feelings, and problems that a man talks about to no one but the woman he loves There are moments of sweet communion when he bares his very

soul to her, as a believer to his god. And when I thought that in a moment of intimacy she might reveal these things—solely and utterly my own—to somebody else, I grew desperate; I foresaw something very like betrayal. Perhaps it is this apprehension that lies at the basis of all jealousy.

I realised that the life I was leading might take me off my chosen path. By this time I knew that I must give myself up wholly to literature. But it was impossible for me to work in such circumstances.

Life had taught me to accept people with their foibles and vices without losing respect for or interest in them. This happily prevented me from making domestic scenes. By then I could see that all people are more or less guilty before the unknown god of absolute truth, and that no one is as guilty before mankind as the self-righteous. The self-righteous are monstrosities born of a union between vice and virtue brought about not through violence and rape, but through legitimate marriage, with ironical necessity playing the role of priest. Marriage is a mystery by which the union of two opposites almost always brings forth drab mediocrity. In those days I was as fond of paradoxes as a child of ices. The vividness of a paradox stimulated me like fine wine, and the paradoxicality of words served to smooth over the crude and hurtful paradoxes of facts.

"I think I had better go away," I said to my wife.

She considered a moment before answering.

"Yes," she said, "you are right. This is no life for you. I understand."

Both of us were sad and silent for a little, then we tenderly embraced and I left town. Soon after that she did too. She went on the stage.

And that is the end of the story of my first love—a happy story, though it had a sad ending.

Not long ago she died.[1]

To her credit let it be said that she was a real woman. She knew how to take life as it came, yet every day for her was the eve of a holiday. She was always expecting that on the morrow the earth would bring forth new and ravishing

flowers, that marvellous people would put in an appearance, and extraordinary events would take place.

She was mocking and contemptuous of life's hardships and waved them away like mosquitoes, always ready to be joyfully astonished by some good thing. This was not the ingenuous rapture of a schoolgirl; it was the wholesome joy of a person in love with the kaleidoscopic changes of life, the tragicomic entanglements of human relations, the flow of daily events flashing by like dust motes in a ray of sunlight.

I cannot say that she loved people, but she loved to observe them. Often she hastened or retarded the development of a drama between husband and wife or between lovers by fanning the jealousy of one or heightening the infatuation of another. This dangerous game held fascination for her.

"'Hunger and love govern the world' and philosophy spoils it," she used to say. "People live for love—it is all-important."

Among our acquaintances was a bank clerk—a tall gaunt man with the slow and pompous stride of a crane. He was very fastidious about his clothes, and as he studied himself in the looking-glass he would flick his coat with bony fingers to remove dust which he alone could see. He was an enemy of all original ideas or expressive words; his heavy precise tongue would have none of them. He spoke slowly and impressively, invariably smoothing out his thin red moustache with cold fingers before he voiced any of the truisms he was so fond of.

"With the passing of time the science of chemistry will assume greater and greater importance in processing raw materials for use in industry. It has been justly said that women are capricious. There is no physiological difference between a wife and a mistress—only a legal one."

Once I said to my wife with a serious mien:

"Do you still maintain that all notaries have wings?"

She replied in a grave and guilty tone:

"Oh, no, not that, but I *do* maintain that it is absurd to feed elephants soft-boiled eggs."

After listening to us go on in this way for a minute or two our friend observed profoundly:

"I am under the impression that you are not speaking seriously."

Another time having just given his knee a painful bang against the leg of the table he said with conviction:

"Density is unquestionably an attribute of matter."

After seeing him to the door one evening my wife, half-reclining on my knee, said brightly and gaily:

"What a complete and absolute fool he is! A fool in everything—walk ... gestures ... every single thing! He fascinates me as a perfect type. Here, stroke my cheek."

She loved to have me run the tips of my fingers lightly over the faint traces of lines appearing under her sweet eyes. Nestling against me like a kitten, she purred:

"How marvellously interesting people are! Even a man whom others find a perfect bore can rouse my interest. I want to peer into him as into a box—perhaps I shall find something hidden away that nobody has ever discovered, something I shall be the first to see."

Her search for "discoveries" was not an affectation; she searched with the pleasure and inquisitiveness of a child entering a strange room for the first time. Sometimes she succeeded in kindling a spark of thought in listless eyes, but more often what she roused was a desire to possess her.

She admired her own body and would exclaim while standing naked in front of a looking-glass:

"How beautifully a woman is made! How harmonious the lines of her body are!"

And again:

"I feel stronger, healthier, and more clever when I'm well dressed."

That was true: a pretty frock added to her wit and gaiety and brought a triumphant sparkle to her eyes. She had the knack of making herself pretty frocks out of mere calico and of wearing them as if they were silk or velvet. Simple as they always were, they created the impression of elegance. Other women went into raptures over them—not always sincerely,

but always vociferously. They envied her and I remember one of them saying peevishly:

"My gown cost three times as much as yours and isn't one-tenth as pretty. It makes me green just to look at you."

Naturally women disliked her and spread gossip about her. A woman doctor, who was as foolish as she was pretty, once said to me:

"That woman will suck all the blood out of you!"

I learned much from my first love, yet the irreconcilable differences that stood between us caused me much pain.

I took life too seriously, saw too much, thought too much, and lived in a constant state of unrest. A chorus of raucous voices were always hurling questions at me that she had no use for.

One day at the market I saw a policeman cudgel a handsome one-eyed old Jew, accusing him of having stolen radishes from a peddler. I saw the old man, his clothes covered with dust, go down the road slowly and with dignity, like a figure in a painting, his one dark eye fixed on the hot and cloudless sky, a thin red stream of blood trickling out of the corner of his mouth down on to his long white beard.

Thirty years have passed since that day, yet I can still see the trembling of his white eyebrows and the mute protest in the eye raised to heaven. It is hard to forget insults dealt to human beings—and may they never be forgotten!

I came home despondent, my soul torn by anger and despair. Such experiences made me hate the world and feel like an outsider subjected to the torture of being shown all that was low, filthy, stupid and horrifying, all that was an offence to the soul. It was at such moments that I became most acutely aware of the great gulf separating me from the woman I loved.

She was greatly astonished when I told her what was on my mind.

"Is *that* what has thrown you into such a state? What delicate nerves you have!" Then: "You said he was handsome? How could he have been handsome if he had only one eye?"

All suffering was repulsive to her, she could not bear to have people talk about misfortune, was never touched by lyric poetry, and rarely showed deep human sympathy Her favourite poets were Heine, who laughed at his own sufferings, and Beranger

Her attitude to life was something like that of a child to a magician all of his tricks are interesting, but the best is always to come He may not show it until tomorrow or even the day after, but show it he surely will

I believe that in the moment of death she still hoped to see that last, most amazing and remarkable trick

1923

Tales of Heroes*

Every cause is begun by man,
And by man made great

The further we cruise on towards the sea, the wider and calmer the Volga becomes The steppelands of the left bank melt into the moon lit mists and the bare earthy cliffs of the right cast deep shadows, where the red and white lights of the buoys blaze brightly out of the water's oily blackness At a slight angle across the river lies a broad moonway, quivering and shimmering like a shoal of silver fish in the ship's course The dark right bank floats away rapidly into the distance and the occasional huts that show up on its summit look like the ancient burial mounds that one sometimes encounters in the steppe The water astern is mistier and darker than in front and this creates the odd impression that the river is flowing uphill The ship cruises on almost soundlessly, sprinkling the water with the brocaded reflections of its lights, the murmur at the stern is soft and caressing, and so is the air it strokes one's face like the hand of a child

In the stern a dozen sleepless individuals are chatting quietly A persistent high pitched voice is especially audible

"What I say is this it's fear that a man dies of "

The word "dies" is drawn out in the manner of the Kostroma folk The remark rouses scornful, mocking and challenging retorts

"You're talking through your hat, citizen!"

"Here's one who's never been in battle "

Others reminded the speaker of typhus, of famine, of the back breaking toil that shortens a man's life A heavily moustached individual muffled in a tarpaulin, sitting shoulder to shoulder with a stout woman, asked crossly,

"And what about old age?"

*English translation © Progress Publishers 1978

The Kostroma man waited for the string of objections to end He was the most striking figure among the ship's passengers He had got on at Nizhny and this was his fourth day aboard Most of the passengers were holiday makers They were all people in government employ, clean and neatly dressed, and in comparison he looked rather dowdy and dishevelled, kind of crumpled, and with a noticeable limp in his right leg, in a word damaged He must have been fifty, if not more A man of average height, lean, with a brown, sinewy neck, a red face fringed with a gingery, grizzled beard, and a pair of light blue eyes that stared from under the jutting brows. And what a searching and at the same time reproachful stare it was It was hard to decide what he did for a living He looked like a factory hand who had once been a "boss" His hands were restless and his lips moved constantly, as though he were trying to recall or calculate something, he was very lively but by no means cheerful

About two hours after coming aboard he had made a tour of inspection, staring unceremoniously at the upper deck passengers, and had asked a member of the crew, "How much does this upper-deck lot pay for a ticket to Astrakhan?"

And a little while later his sing song voice piped up from the lower deck

"Of course, the light stuff floats to the top, it's bound to, but the heavy stuff sticks to the ground Well, now I reckon they've got things right If you want an easy life, you pay four times more for it "

You could not have called the man a chatterer or thought him particularly good natured, but clearly he was possessed by an urge to talk about and explain all that he had seen or was seeing, all that he had learned or was learning For this he had his own words Obviously they had not come to him easily and he was eager to impart them to others perhaps in order to convince himself more firmly of their truth He would limp up to a chatting group, listen for

a minute or two in silence, and then the high pitched voice would come out with something not quite usual

"That's the way things are now, citizen You're for me and I'm for you We're all working for the same cause now We're like the legs of one pair of trousers part of each other You're not my master and I'm not your servant Isn't that so?"

The citizen in question, somewhat abashed by the unexpected intrusion of this strange individual, would give him a not very friendly look An elderly woman with a red scarf round her head said with a sigh, "That's how it is, but people won't see it that way!"

"The ones that won't see it are the ones who're walking backwards, living arse to-front," the lame man replied, sweeping his arm in the direction of the darker bank as the ship turned and left it astern

"That's true enough," the woman agreed "Come and sit down with us, comrade!" she suggested

He remained standing, and two or three minutes later his high pitched voice said clearly, "Every cause is begun by people and it's people who make it great "

It sounded like a saying, but a saying that he had just invented, and that had come to him quite unexpectedly He had been doing this for nearly four days, provoking discussions, tirelessly bent on achieving something And now, having listened attentively to all the objections to his statement "It's fear that a man dies of" he spoke again with a warningly raised hand

"Old folk, of course, peg out *from collapse of the body's* system, and some of the young 'uns, from being a bit too lively What I'm talking about is not everybody, but about the gentry The gentry were afraid of death like little children, say, are afraid of the dark I know the gentry pretty well, they didn't enjoy life much and what they did enjoy was as dull as ditchwater "

"How come you know all this," the man with the moustache asked sarcastically "You don't look like lackey "

A young fellow in an army greatcoat and cloth helmet broke in sharply, "Pardon me, citizen! But why the insulting word 'lackey'?"

"There's a saying: for the lackey there's no such thing as a man."

"Keep your saying to yourself."

Another voice joined in.

"Your saying was made up when a lackey wasn't considered a human being...."

"Now, that's enough, citizens!"

The lame man waited patiently, choosing a cigarette from his case.

"I could pepper you, citizen, with all the sayings you want, but that wouldn't get us anywhere. It's not true, you know, that 'a saying survives the centuries'."

The Red Army man interrupted him.

"It isn't true about fear either. Nowadays the bourgeoisie are afraid of death, but in former days...."

"In former days too," the lame man insisted firmly, pulling hard at his newly lighted cigarette. "I know life on the inside, I was a floor-polisher in St. Petersburg."

"Oh well, if that's the case..." the man with the moustache grunted, and gave a surly laugh.

"Yes, it was the case! Till the age of thirteen, being an orphan, I was a herdboy, and after that my godfather came to our village and snatched me like a wolf snatches a sheep. So for four years I danced about with a brush on my foot in apartments and restaurants, and brothels too. There was some very posh knocking shops in Peter in those days, where the real ladies came, unbeknown to their husbands, and the husbands, too, on the quiet. All four years I lived in the backyard of one of those brothels, in the basement, so I saw a thing or two."

The lame man smoked hurriedly, inhaling deep into his lungs, and the smoke poured out from under his fuzzy yellow moustache, as though from some inner fire, as though he were about to breathe out flames as well as smoke.

"And I've been in all kinds of battles," he went on, addressing the Red Army man "I've done a lot more fighting than I reckon you'll ever do, brother, or than I'd wish you to I was at Lyaoyan [1] and sweated my boots to bits in the retreat "

Someone laughed and the fat woman asked, "Are you proud of it?"

"No, why should I be?" the narrator replied in his ringing voice "I've got other things to be proud of an Order of St George, two crosses while I was knocking about the fronts from Chernovitsi and all the way to Riga [2] Wounded twice there, and twice in our own army, for the Soviets that's enough to make you proud, I should say!"

"What did you get the crosses for?" the moustached man asked

"One for reconnaissance and capturing a machine gun, and the other was voted to me by the company," the lame man replied quickly but with apparent reluctance, he spat into his palm, stubbed out the cigarette in the spittle, tossed it overboard and fell silent

Two young women with their arms round each other came up, singing quietly

One of them said, "Oh, look a boat just like a cockroach "

"And the lights on the bank," said the other pensively, while the Red Army man was asking something about the machine gun

"Oh, that was just chance," the lame veteran responded unwillingly "They sent three of us out on patrol and put me in command At night, of course The Austrians weren't far away, something had made them stir That was right at the beginning of the war We crawled forward and just ahead, behind some bushes, somebody coughed It turned out to be a machine gun nest, kind of ambush There were five of 'em there We took one, he could understand Russian, turned out to be a vet And we left one of ours behind because they were coming after us and he was wounded and we had the machine gun to carry Our perpetration was consid

ered an act of bravery and it even got read out before the regi ment "

"When did you spoil your leg?" the Red Army man asked

"That was when we was chasing Mr Denikin,[3]" the lame man replied quite readily "I saved that leg through my own pigheadedness, the doctor wanted to cut it off I tried to talk him round leave it, I says, it'll head up And he, of course was in a hurry, hundreds crying out all round him and he ready to cry himself, in his place I'd have set about them arms and legs with an axe, for pity's sake But he believed me, and so here's the leg I've still got it!"

"You are a hero then," one of the young women said

"In the civil war, fighting for the Soviets, we was all heroes "

"Not all," the man with the moustache reminded him "There were times when we ran for it like at Lyaoyan, and times when we gave ourselves up "

"I never saw anyone running, but I've surrendered as a prisoner myself more than once," the story teller replied quickly "You'd surrender and afterwards you'd escape and bring a few dozen over to your own side with you Even more sometimes "

"Are you a peasant?" the woman asked

"All people come from peasant stock, so science tells us "

The Red Army man asked, "Are you in the Party?"

"What would it need with the likes of me? In the Party they're real educated But I was always too hard up, I couldn't read or write till I was nearly forty I learned from having nothing else to do when I was in hospital wounded The comrades shamed me into it, 'How can you be like this, Zausailov? Come on, Brainy, hurry up and learn,' they would say So they taught me and now I can scribble a bit Afterwards they used to say with regret, 'If you'd only known your letters before the revolution, Brainy, you might have made a good commander' But how was I to know there'd be a revolution? During the other revolution, after the war with Japan, the only thing I thought of was how to

get back to my village and be a herdsman, but instead of that I landed up in a punishment company, in Omsk."

The Red Army man burst out laughing, so did someone else, and the man with the moustache said in an edifying tone, "You sure are pretty weak in your letters, chum, you say 'perpetration' when you mean 'performance'."

"Well, it'll do," the veteran brushed the objection aside, pulling out another cigarette, and the Red Army man moved up closer to him and asked, "What did you get into the punishment company for?"

"Four of us did—not guarding a prisoner properly, and me for not shooting; he jumped out of the truck and went running along the rails, and I was on sentry duty by the engine. Well, I could see he was in a hurry, but in those days we was all in a hurry, at every station there was a real hustle and bustle. At the trial Second Lieutenant Izmailov states, 'I shouted to him—shoot!' 'Did he?' asks the judge. 'Yes, sir!' 'Then why didn't you shoot?' 'Couldn't see who to shoot at.' 'You mean you couldn't recognise the prisoner?' 'No, sir.' 'But you had been travelling as escort with him in the same truck for three stations? Now then, it's no good pretending to be a fool.' And then he demanded we should all be shot. But none of us was...."

He burst into young, ringing laughter and shook his head.

"That was a crazy time, that was!"

"Well, you're quite a chap," the Red Army man said with approval, and smacked him on the knee. "What are you doing now?"

"Bee-keeping. At an experimental station. It's an interesting job, you know. I was taught about it in Tambov by an old chap, rotten swine he was, by the way, but wise as Solomon in his own field!"

Zausailov was becoming more and more animated and cheerful, as if the Red Army man's praises had encouraged him.

The fat woman walked away and her moustachioed companion said, "I'll be along in a minute."

But almost at once he rose and walked away himself and his place on the coil of rope was taken by the girl who had compared a boat to a cockroach.

"The things he could do with bees—you've never seen anything like it in a circus!" Zausailov went on, and smacked his lips. "He himself was a nasty insect and he got what he was due for—we settled his hash in 'twenty-one, for serving with the bandits. That was when I caught my fifth packet—they cracked my skull for me. But I don't count that because it was peace time by then. And besides it was my own fault; I was too inquisitive, I like a bit of scouting. In our army, too, I was considered pretty smart at it."

"'Our army' means the Red Army?" the girl asked quietly.

"Sure it does. We haven't got any other. Though I used to do a bit in the other one too. But there, of course, I had to, I was under orders; but with ours it was voluntary like."

He fell into a thoughtful silence. A woman with a boy of seven or eight came out on deck; the boy was thin and pale, evidently ill.

"Won't he go to sleep?" the girl asked.

"Not a wink!"

"I want to be with you," the lad declared crossly, cuddling up to the girl.

She said, "Well, sit down then and listen to what an interesting story this man's telling us."

"That one?" the boy asked, pointing at the Red Army man.

"No, the other."

The boy looked at Zausailov and drawled disappointedly, "Oh, but he's old."

The Red Army man put his arm round the boy and drew him to his side.

"Old but still bold," Zausailov responded, and the Red Army man, taking the boy on his lap, asked, "How did you land up with the bandits, comrade?"

"I found them out, and then they found me out. It was like this. I noticed some fellows lurking about round the

hives, all the same type, like a pack of wolves, miserable looking lot So I says to the comrades in town, there's something fishy going on here, lads! And they gave me a mission Try and convince them you're on their side Well, that was easy enough A pretty ignorant lot, they turned out to be, so bitter it had addled their brains The horse minder, he was a bit cleverer than the others and he showed up more often He had been a soldier, too, an artilleryman, and he was fifteen or twenty years older than me The thing that had got his back up was being banned from training horses On top of that he drank He was supposed to be the gang's adjutant, so to speak, and besides him there was a soldier from the Rostov regiment, a grenadier, and a fine accordion player too."

The boy pressed his cheek into the Red Army man's shoulder and dozed off and the girl sat with her elbows on her knees and her face between her hands, gazing out across the water with arched eyebrows The ship had come in close to the right bank and was passing a massive headland, below which lay a large village a single row of houses enclosed between two churches, like a line of print between brackets On the other side there was a shaggy looking sand bank cov ered with black bushes, and all this was gliding rapidly astern, as if it wanted to get out of sight as soon as possible

"The gang wasn't very big, about fifty all told It was commanded by some kind of official, a forest warden, I think, quite an ordinary bastard really But suspicious And these three keep on ordering me to find this out and find that out And the comrades in town tell me what I can find out and what can't. They was keeping their forces scattered, you see ten here, ten there, murdering our people, burning down a school, in short, their trade was thuggery And my job was to get them all into a bunch, so that our lads could round 'em all up at once, like birds in a net. Well, we set a bait for them it was in the Borisoglebsk district, I remember, at an oil mill They seemed to trust me and started gathering their forces And then, the devil knows

defenders retreated into the forest And for about a year and a half, dear comrade, we had to wriggle like carp in a net, wherever we went there were Whites and sometimes the Reds turned White and the Whites came over to us Over the hills the big civil war was going on and Kolchak was being defeated But here we were fighting our own civil war and there seemed to be no end to it It was like a forest fire, we'd put it out in one place and it would flare up in another We even slipped across into the Osinsky *uyezd*, lot of poor folk there, all sack makers and rope makers Uncle Yegor was feeling bad, he had fallen under his horse and been wounded in the leg Near the town of Osa he was captured by the Whites, he and three others ran into some of their cavalry, two of them were killed outright and he was wounded The fourth, a grammar school boy from Perm, ran back to town, where I was with Lisa She sent me to see if there was anything we could do to help Uncle When I got there, Yegor was hanging from a tree, half naked and all covered in blood, as if they had torn the skin off him bit by bit terrible it was! And his right hand was missing I asked one of the sack makers what they had punished him for "He was a Bolshevik," he says "A real one They tortured him and he just swore back at them! They tormented him out of his senses I reckon he was dead by the time they strung him up "

"'Then I went a bit off my rocker, I was so sorry for my comrade! There was a crowd round the pier and I says to them, "Aren't you ashamed, you dogs? It's you that ought to be hanged, you heartless lot!" I didn't shout for long They took me off to the chief A grey haired old fellow, shaking as if he had some kind of fever and he gives his order, "The rod!" Well, they gave me twenty of the best with their clean ing rods and for a week I couldn't sit or lie down on my back It's a good job I've got that kind of body the more they beat it the firmer it gets It's like physical jerks Yes, com rade, I've known some beatings in my time, no less than a mettlesome horse My skin's so bruised and battered I sometimes wonder if there's any blood left in me? But it

whole thing was such a muddle, you couldn't tell who was on what side Nikita advised me, "Mind how you go, comrade Anfisa Keep your ears sharp and open!" He taught me a thing or two and my head cleared a bit I was rushing around the whole district, either addressing women at meetings or doing a bit of scouting It's difficult for me to tell you about it all, there was so much of everything it flows before my eyes like a river I did do some work then glory be to the Lord!""

"This godly utterance confused her She could not blush because her face was as red as a hot brick already, but she spread her arms and laughed, exclaiming guiltily, 'Oh, bother it all I never meant to say that! It's just habit, comrade! Those words are just an empty shell! There's no need to glorify your own people, is there? Their glory is in their deeds Well, never mind Yes, my dear man, I got a kick out of what I was doing Yegor Nesterov gathered together a little detachment, about thirty, and went to the village to punish them You see, they had been smashing up people's houses and farms Ivan had probably been killed anyway, he had disappeared and Stepanida's little house had been burnt down They had murdered Avdotya Mokeyeva and raped her sister Tanyusha she goes about half dotty to this day Yegor held a trial on the square Nikita Ustyugov made a speech and the people unanimously condemned Antonov, my master, and two others, Zotov the miller, and the priest They were shot then and there Dyukov slipped away, the police officer was killed in a gun battle, and old Mokeyev got his hair and beard shaven clean off now, they told him, you can go about like that! It was all so terrible, but, believe it or not, when they brought Mokeyev out into the street with his head shaven, he looked so funny that everyone laughed fit to drop, till the tears ran, and all the fear vanished amid laughter! It was Nikita thought of that joke Oh, he was a clever man, he was! They made him chairman of the village Soviet, and Lisa the secretary I was given a job too, I was busy with the women By now they all trusted me "You wouldn't have left a rich

way he argued that it's God makes life difficult you couldn't help believing him Well

"What happened was that in the heat of the chase our detachment pushed far on ahead, way beyond Kursk it was We were chasing Denikin and anyway it was a good old mix up all round, you couldn't tell where they were or where ours were Well, the comrades tell me, 'Off you go, Zausailov, try and find out who's on our left flank And how many And take a couple of lads of your own choice with you ' That was right, of course, seeing as I didn't know my letters So I took Sashok and Vassily Klimov a solid sort of chap, he was, like one of them senior janitors they used to have in Petersburg in the days of tsardom Aye, there used to be such janitors there he was, just a janitor, the son-of a gun, but he'd got the bearing of a church elder

"So off we go We didn't know the lie of the land, so we stuck to the railway Sashok and Klimov on one side of the embankment, me on the other, about a hundred paces ahead The track was all to pieces, of course It was a moonlit night, the wind was blustering around, clouds chasing along, here a shadow, there a shadow, and all of a sudden bang! 'Halt!' comes a shout Five of 'em I spotted Whites they may have been, but they were just the same colour as the earth and the bushes, lying low by the embankment Their commander, young fellow he was, hadn't even grown a moustache yet, revolver in hand, sword at his side, and one o' them little rifles over his shoulder fitted out good enough for a snapshot he was Well, he aims straight into my eye and starts interrogating and shouting at me, I, of course, as if I was scared out of my wits, shouted at the top of my voice too, so that Sashok and Klimov would hear I'm running away from the Reds, I says, because I'm afraid of getting mobilised! And he was just beginning to believe me, when one of the soldiers give him the tip 'His bearing looks suspicious, Your Honour He must be a soldier, one of their spies!' Oh, you, rotten bastard, I thought So they beat me up a bit and sent me off under escort, with two of them to guard me The guards were in no hurry and it started

raining I tried a bit of clowning on them but I could see it wouldn't work, they were in a nasty temper, because they were tired probably So I decided to keep quiet, otherwise they might have finished me off on the spot, the devils

"Well, to cut a long story short, we got to a village, a big village it was, and badly knocked about, it had had two big fires and some of the huts had been shelled By the wall of the churchyard, under some trees, there was a tethering rail with seventeen horses hitched to it none of 'em any good A bit further on, two of our chaps were hanging from a tree Well, I thought, if I don't make a getaway, this is where I'll end up It was very dark, hardly any lights in the windows, past midnight by now and the white warriors fast asleep There were about five in the porch of the church, sheltering from the rain I was marched to the school and, just opposite, there was a good sized house, two storeys, but with the roof damaged All lit up it was and there was some high jinks going on there One of the escorts goes in there, the other sits down on the school steps and I, of course, am left standing in the rain no chance of running away from here

"The other escort comes out and says, 'Orders are he's to be kept till tomorrow' that's me they have in mind So they had a pow wow about where to lock me up and took me a short way from the school and pushed me into a hut Inside it's pitch dark, all the windows boarded up One of them lights a match and I can see the floor has been ripped up, one corner smashed and the roof beams are hanging down inside, and in the corner there's a pile of rags, looks as if there might be a dead man lying there And the rain was coming in The soldier had a good look round, then went out into the porch and left the door unlocked Pity he didn't lock the door, otherwise it would have been just too easy to get out of here, I thought. So I sits there It's quiet all round, just a snort or a snuffle from the horses, and the patter of the rain, no sound of people The soldier in the porch poked around a bit, then he began to snuffle too and soon I could hear him snoring

"By now I had lost count of the time, of course, never could remember what time it was, and I just sat there wide awake and having something like a nightmare I was real down in the mouth and ashamed of myself fancy getting a caught like this! I struck a match quietly and had a look round The beams were hanging so that you could probably have climbed into the hut, but not out of it I stood up and tried but they were too shaky

"And then I get a shock like I'd been splashed with hot water 'Zausailov!' somebody whispers And it's Sashok! 'Climb out,' he whispers 'I can't, there's a soldier in the doorway ' Then there's a silence and I hear a scraping and creaking of the beams And luckily at that moment I stepped back to the stove because the whole lot came tumbling down into the hut with a terrible din Well, now we were both in the soup

"The soldier, he wakes up, of course, and shouts 'What the hell's going on there?' It's not my fault, I says, the corner fell in by itself Well, he didn't care a damn, of course, as long as the prisoner was alive till the appointed time Otherwise he'd have been only too glad if I'd been crushed All was quiet again, and then I heard someone breathing and put out my hand, and there was a head 'Sashok,' I whispers, 'what are you doing here?' And he explains 'We heard everything,' he says 'So I sent Klimov back and came on after you myself Their main forces,' he says, 'aren't here but about four versts away ' Yes, he had found all that out 'They think our chaps are in their rear and on their right.' He seemed to be gritting his teeth as he talked and very short of breath 'I've scratched my side badly,' he says, 'it's bleeding like hell and my leg's trapped ' I felt around and, sure enough, his leg was pinned under the beams I tried to move one of them but he whispered, 'Leave it alone or I'll scream and that'll be the end of you! Make your getaway now Do you remember all I told you? Get going!' No, I can't leave him, I thought, and moved the beam again 'Stop it, you crazy devil!' he hissed 'I'll scream!' What was I to do? I tried just once more, I might be able to free his leg And,

believe it or not, I heard the bone crunch Yes, you know, a real crunch! That meant I'd crushed it He gave a little moan and went quiet Dead quiet Well, I thought, it's all up, forgive and farewell, Sashok!"

Zausailov lowered his head and felt in his cigarette case, as if looking for one that was well packed Without raising his head, he continued his story in a quiet voice and rather reluctantly

"During the night the comrades caught up with us and the next evening we drove the Whites into the ravine and that was the end of it Klimov and me and a dozen others were the first to enter that damned village Of course, it was on fire again And Sashok was hanging from that same tree where one of the others had been before a young chap, they had taken him down and thrown him into a puddle, in the mud Sashok was naked, except for one leg of his underpants All beaten up, no face left, side slit open Arms hanging down straight and his head on one side, like a man admitting his guilt But I was the guilty one "

"You're wrong there," the Red Army man muttered "Both of you did your duty, comrade "

Zausailov lighted another cigarette and kept the match alight in the cup of his hand until the flame was almost touching his fingers, then he blew on it and pinched the glowing tip

"That was a real hero "

"I should say so," the schoolmistress responded and, addressing the Red Army man, "Is he asleep?"

"Well away," the Red Army man replied, glancing at the boy's face, then after a pause he said weightily "We've still got plenty of heroes Take the frontier guards in Central Asia, for instance Those lads are doing a smashing job! I know of a case when two of our men went out on patrol in the steppe and it was a dark night. They separated and one of them bumped into a gang of local bandits They grabbed him before he had time to shoot back Then he shouted to his comrade, 'Shoot at my voice!' The other fired off a whole magazine right away, wounded one bandit and the others

ran, even dropped the rifle they had taken But then the bandits attacked the other and he shouted, 'You do the same!' He hadn't had time to reload his rifle and was fighting them off with the butt Then the first started pumping bullets at where his voice came from and hit another bandit When they got back to the post and told their story no one would believe' em But in the morning they did from the blood! After all, shooting at a comrade's voice meant shooting at him, didn't it? You get me?"

"That's clear enough," Zausailov said "Don't you worry, little by little we're coming to understand our task Have you been on leave, comrade?"

"On business "

The girl stood up

"Thank you I must wake Sasha now "

"Why do that? I can carry him in," the Red Army man said

They walked away together Zausailov also got up, went to the rail and threw his cigarette into the river

The silver orb of the moon had climbed high in the heavens, the shadows from the right bank had shortened and the whole bank seemed to be drifting away even faster into the murky distance

2 This story was told to me by one of those people who for about thirty years had been saying a decisive "No!" to the Russian scene, but after October had cautiously begun to say "Yes!" while still accompanying each "yes" with a more or less sceptical "but"

One warm summer evening I was sitting with this person in a grove of fir trees on a sandy bluff, below the bluff was a stretch of meadowland, poisonously green after the rain, and as if splashed over its surface, a muddy red on the green, ran the slow waters of small river Beyond the river were some dark trees, and to the right of us, above the snowdrifts of clouds the purple evening sun cast its slanting

rays on the water, the meadow and the golden sand of the bluff

Looking out across the river, the man smoked and talked unhurriedly, musingly

"The thing that finally rid me of my hesitations was meeting a certain woman That was two years ago in one of the small townships on the upper Kama I was sitting in the *uyezd* committee office having a man to-man talk with the chairman and the secretary and coming to the sad conclusion that, although both of them were quite decent fellows, they were hopelessly tangled up in the toils of the old life, and that instead of being in control themselves they were being led up the garden by local reactionary forces They were half aware of this themselves The secretary, a young and apparently quite talented poet, was already asserting that

Mighty trees will sometimes grow
From roots assailed by rot

"He didn't write that and I don't remember who did, but that was the general tenor of his verse And as for the chairman, a local man, son of a factory clerk, used to be in the partisan movement, had a rough time, now married, three children, very tired, not much theoretical background, no clear picture of what he was doing, he had apparently decided,

Come what may, let it be so,
We stopped caring long ago

"It was a desolate sort of town, ignorant and bigoted, the kind the poet had in mind when he wrote,

Our town to a graveyard may be compared,
Graves for all it has long since prepared.

"It was a Sunday afternoon, hot as a bath house outside and the white place was wrapped in somnolent stillness Beyond the house-tops there rose a hill muffled in a great bearskin of forest, from which through our open windows

came the smell of resin and an acrid whiff of smoke some one must have been burning charcoal up there "

In his efforts to be lively my companion was recklessly overdoing the verse quotations Quotations may give an impression of erudition but since they seldom clinch an argument the impression is often created that the person using them is paying for attention with stolen farthings

"Well, we went on talking, getting more and more embarrassed with each other and beginning to lose our tempers, when suddenly a big steaming red face, a woman's, appears at the window as if it had popped straight out of the hot ground Two bluish grey eyes, oozing perspiration, peered in at us with a look of scorn and hostility and a thick, heavy voice boomed disapprovingly, 'Doing yourselves nicely, aren't you! Tea with sugar in it!'

" 'What the devil brought her here again,' the chairman muttered, scratching under his arm while the woman went on filling the room with a rumble of reproaches, 'Well, Comrade Semyonov, so you diddled me, did you? You thought, I'll just talk her round clever like and she'll be satisfied? And I've tramped another sixty versts! So get ready to receive your guest!'

"The face disappeared from the window I asked who it was The chairman gave a dismissive sweep of the hand 'A madcap of a woman!' And the secretary explained rather self-consciously, 'She's a labourer We have her name down as a candidate for Party membership '

"The 'madcap of a woman' squeezed in through the doorway with some difficulty She was, to put it mildly, somewhat bulky for a woman She must have weighed a good 200 pounds, if not more, was broad in the shoulders and in the hips and about six foot tall She propped a big cudgel in the corner, jerked off her knapsack with a flick of her mighty shoulder, placed it carefully in the corner, straightened up, and with a noisy sigh came towards us, wiping the sweat off her face with the sleeve of her blouse

" 'Hullo again! Citizen or comrade?' she asked me, planting herself down on a chair it creaked under

her On learning that I was a comrade, she asked further, 'Not from Moscow, are you?' And when I said that I was, she lost all interest in her chiefs, pulled out of her immense bosom a large chunk of leather that turned out to be an army dispatch case, banged it down on the table, but without letting it out of her hands and, leaning into me with her shoulder, began to talk in a practical forceful manner

"'Now then, you sort out our affairs for us! Look, this is a copy of the instruction from the provincial Party committee, isn't it? That's his orders,' she nodded at the chairman 'And this is what he wrote back to 'em So I've got a right to speak, haven't I?'

"For about ten minutes she used this right continuously, telling us about co-operators who 'can't trade on purpose', about the dairy co-operative that the kulaks were preventing from reorganising into a collective farm, about the mysteri ous damaging of the separating plant that had still not been investigated, about husbands who beat their wives, about the opposition from the chairman's wife and the schoolteacher, a priest's daughter, to the organisation of a nursery school, about the flight of the local reporter of a Komsomol paper in fear of his life, and many other similar troubles and crises that occur daily in all the out-of the-way parts of our country in the course of the struggle for the new way of life, the new world "

As he went on with his story my companion gradually became carried away, forgot about quoting poetry and added some lively finishing touches to his description of the woman's figure, her gestures and even her sparing use of her handkerchief Twice she had taken it out of her skirt pocket to wipe the sweat off her face and put it back again, having used the sleeve of her blouse instead

"She reeked of sweat like a horse," he said "The secretary poured her a glass of tea, 'Have a drink, Anfisa!' But with the first greedy gulp of the hot yellowish liquid she forgot to take any sugar and, when she did take a piece, started to tap with it on the table in time with her indignant utterances and then slipped it into her pocket and took

another piece and exclaimed in embarrassment, 'Oh, what am I doing!' But then she also slipped the other piece mechanically into her pocket and swallowed down the cold tea as if it were kvass 'Pour me another, Comrade Yakov'"

The narrator chuckled and snorted out smoke and I listened Yes, this is all very true, I thought, he's bringing this woman to life very well, I know there is such a woman

I had, in fact, observed just such a "delegatka", a woman labourer, at the All Union congress on protection of motherhood in Moscow, just such a big, red faced, buxom woman, very much like the professional "wet nurse" of tsarist times Today she was one of the generators that were supplying the country with new energy, a veritable moun tain of a woman with a statesman's mind She came from the Ural region and in the same vehement way and with a good understanding of the importance of the question declared that the five year plan allotted too little attention and funds to child care I remember her saying, "Right now, when we are going to have our own oil in the region, we must do a big job of work and take good care of the children as well we are going to have even less time, so besides, just look at us, what good are we for bringing up children, for teaching children? This means that public care and upbringing of the children must be expanded Isn't that so?"

She got a big round of applause

But now my companion, smoking hurriedly, was proceeding with his story

"She poured such a load of these day to-day crises and troubles on my head that I missed the 'logic of events' in the ensuing chaos All I could feel was that this 200-pound Anfisa was a creature quite out of the ordinary and new to me, that I must try to find out just how she had 'reached this state in life' You know that our literature has not been very generous in describing such women, although in real life, in the country, they have, of course, always been active as indefatigable and selfless builders of their 'own little nook' As I listened to this one I realised that she, too, came from the ranks of the family nest builders, but out of the habit of

being a hired labourer she had now mechanically switched her energy to social construction But would it last? Or was it only till the first chance, till a profitable marriage or, in general, any opportunity to build her nest? In what she said there was an awful lot about minor day to-day practice and very little evidence of theory but, as you know, our comrades are supposed to suffer from a too theoretical approach to everyday life, to the work in hand Still what do you expect? You can't build anything without a plan Although, on the other hand, the inventors and creators of the new, always seem to jump out of the framework of the plan To cut a long story short, I invited her to come over, I was staying with the agronomist, an old friend of mine She came and over some tea I grilled her pretty thoroughly until late in the evening I can't convey the colour of her story, of course, but some of it stamped itself almost literally on my memory Her father was a sheepskin tailor, he used to go round the villages making up half length and full length sheepskins for the local people Her mother died when she was nine, her father allowed her to finish at the parish school, then sent her as a 'nurse' into the family of a well to-do peasant, and about three years later took her away with him to a village on the Kama, where he married a widow with two children In these conditions Anfisa, of course, again became a nurse to the children of her stepmother, her maid of all work, and the stepmother turned out to be a 'hard living, hard drinking woman', a good match for her father, who was equally fond of drinking and celebrating He would often say, 'Why should we hurry? You can't make sheepskins for all the peasants in this country And if we hurry we'll soon peg out ourselves'

"She was just sixteen when her father died of anthrax and with her father's death the stepmother's household became even more of a burden for Anfisa to carry

"'One of our neighbours was an old chap called Nikola Ulanov He made his living out of hunting, but until he got crushed in a pit accident he had been a mine foreman He walked with a limp and was considered to be not quite all

there, because he was so gloomy, hardly ever said a word, and gave people such surly looks He was all on his own, so I used to do a bit of washing and mending for him and he began to treat me a little more gentle like "You're wasting your strength, girl, on those drunkards of yours People love to feed on other people's strength, it's the rich that have made them like that That's where people take their bad example from, the whole world takes after them in their evil ways " These thoughts he spoke appealed to me and I could see he was right in what he said the village was a rich one and the people were hard and greedy and all at each other's throats So I asked Nikola what I should do "Go and find a husband for yourself," he says "You're a sturdy wench, a good worker, you'll find a place in a rich home " Well, even in those days I wasn't quite a fool, I could see he was sending me just where he had warned me not to go But I took those first words of his to heart all the same '

"She related this part of her life not very willingly, with a bit of a sneer in her eyes and rather coldly, as though she were talking not of herself but of some old friend that she now found uninteresting and even unpleasant But sudden ly she somehow braced herself, thumped her knee with her fist and screwed up her eyes as if looking into the distance

"'And then my stepmother's brother arrived He had been a sailor on the Volga steamships, a man of about forty, a real brute of a man he was! He soon took his sister in hand, turned her out with her children into the bath house, rebuilt the house, added a shop to it and started a business Buying and selling and lending money Soon he had three cows and a flock of sheep, and was letting his land to a rich kulak, Antonov And I was his washerwoman, cook and cowherd, I had to spin and weave and keep an eye on everything well nigh pulled me apart it did, I could feel my bones cracking! A real rough time I had! Take a look at me, comrade I'm strong as an ox, but I'm telling you, there were times when I fainted right out!'

"She laughed in that deep husky voice of hers, a strange unwomanly laughter Then, when she had wiped her face

and mouth with a handkerchief, she drew a deep breath

"'And it got even worse when he jumped on me one day and raped me I fought with him but he was too much for me, I was sick at the time with some woman's trouble That was a real blow I had been going out with a lad called Nesterov They were a nice family, not rich people, lived quietly, and there were two brothers, Ivan and Yegor They all lived together as one family, the lad's uncle was a widower Afterwards he became a partisan and was hung by the Whites The lad I was courting with was killed in the first year of the imperialist war and his father was ruined by the kulaks and disappeared Out of the whole family only Lisa was left Now she's a friend of mine and this is her fourth year in the Party In 1916, clever girl, she went away to work at a factory in Perm and got a good training there I haven't come to that part yet And I wanted to leave, too, when that idiot raped me, and I still wanted to, but he says, 'Where can you go? You haven't a passport and I won't let you get one I've got the power for that Live with me, you fool, I won't harm you I won't marry you either, because I've got a wife in Chistopol She's living with another man now, but still the law won't let me marry If she dies I'll marry you God be my witness!'

"'I couldn't stand him really but, silly woman that I was, I didn't want to give up the house I'd put such a lot of my strength and energy into it And the Nesterovs were almost like my own family to me So I gave in to my feelings and stayed I never showed him much affection, he was repulsive and there must have been something wrong with him We went on living together but there were never any children The women made fun of me and even worse fun of him They used to tease him and he got angry, of course, and he used to let it out on me Lay into me he would! One day he wound a pair of reins round my neck and dragged me along by them, nearly choked me And another time he hit me on the back of the head with a log Good job I've got a lot of hair, but I was out cold for a long time He nearly bit off the nipple on my left breast, the rotten devil, it's still hanging by

a thread But why go into all that, I'm sure you know yourself, comrade, what they say about peasant life, "Never mind if your wife fags out as long as your horse stays alive " And then that awful war began '

"At this point she fell silent, fanning her fiery red face with her handkerchief, and seemed to ponder

"'Yes, that awful war I say that out of habit, but it strikes me sometimes that it wasn't really so bad, of course, the working people suffered, but that war did quite a bit of good When they had taken all the men away and left the village bare, what did I see? The women were living a kind of life better, more friendly like They were upset at first, but soon they found they were their own mistresses and they became more public spirited, because, like it or not, they had to help one another Our rich men, the way they carried on terrible it was! There were eight of them, counting my master, and of course the priests were hand in glove with them we had two churches And so was the police officer, he was the son in law of Antonov, the richest man in the village The things they did with the women whose men were away, they just squeezed them dry! They'd cheat them out of their rations, march them off to their houses and keep them prisoner It makes me sick to tell you about it I tried to persuade the women, the younger ones, to go and complain! But they wouldn't listen, they hadn't any faith in me There was I living among my pots and pans, buckets and troughs, looking at the robbery and lechery that was going on, and more and more often I'd remember old man Ulanov's words about the rich, "The whole world takes after them in their evil ways " And I felt so miserable! I'd have gone away but I could see there was nowhere to go Then Lisa Nesterova arrived, she had got her leg burnt and was walking with a crutch She says to me, "Do you know what the workers think?" And she told me I was interested but I couldn't believe it. I hadn't seen many workers and there were nasty rumours about them What good are the workers, I thought. Now, if it was the peasants! Lisa told me a lot about the years 1905 and 1906 and I suppose some of it stuck in my mind

She went away when she was better And there was I, left behind again like a tree stump in a field, no one to say a word to The women didn't like me Sometimes down by the river or at the well they'd shout right in my face, "Look at the dog from the thief's yard," and a lot other nasty things. But I kept quiet What could you say? It was all true And how miserable I felt Sometimes I'd go and have a weep all by myself in a corner somewhere

"'Well, the year 1917 came along, they kicked out the tsar and in summer the men came flocking back from the war, just as they were, with their rifles and all their equipment Nikita Ustyugov arrived and with him a lively lad called Ignat I can't remember his surname and another fellow who looked a bit like a Gypsy They called him Pyotr The very next day they held a village meeting and declared, "We're Bolsheviks! Down with all the rich!" It didn't sound all that serious the way they put it, our moneybags just laughed and the poorer ones didn't believe them Nor did I with my silly woman's head But then I noticed that my master was whispering about something with his pals and they all looked a bit downhearted They gathered in the shop nearly every evening and you could see they were put out That meant someone was doing well, but I couldn't see who All of a sudden what do I hear? The tsar's been brought to Tobolsk I asked the master in one of his kinder moments why this was "He's been made redundant, now he'll only rule in Siberia In Moscow his uncle's going to take over, he's called Nikolai too " I didn't believe him either and it looked as if Lisa had been right In the shop they were growling, "Those dogs are baring their teeth at other people's property " One evening I slipped round to Nikita and asked him what was going on and he shouts at me, "I explain to you, thickheaded devils, nearly every day! Why can't you understand? What are you a farmhand? Working for a thief?" He was a wiry man with shaggy black hair, and his teeth were ever so white He had a ringing voice and he shouted at you as if you were deaf He wasn't spiteful though, just so frenzied When I left him I

hardly knew myself, honestly I didn't It was like I had put on a new dress and it was too tight for me, I was afraid to move And the wheels were spinning round in my head From that day on I didn't know what side I was living on and I felt as if I was breathing in smoke But all of a sudden my master started being kind to me

"'You trust me and no one else,' he says, 'I won't do you any harm and when things quieten down we'll get married, my wife has died You can go to Nikita's meetings,' he says, 'and listen to what they say there, what they're up to Find out where the deserters he's gathered round him are from, and who they are ' All right, I thought, you're very crafty but not as clever as you think you are And in the midst of all the hurly burly the October Revolution came along A Soviet was organised in the village Old Antonov was elected chairman and the secretary was Dyukov Before the war he used to work in the state-owned boozer and not much had been seen of him He used to play the guitar and had a fine way of doing his hair, like a priest long hair it was All the Soviet was made up of rich men Ustyugov and Ignat rebelled Ustyugov wanted to be in the Soviet himself, but he didn't get the support, not many people would follow him, they were afraid of his boldness Pyotr, this friend of his, also went over to the moneybags and spoke for them Some time passed and Ignat was killed, then another of the deserters disappeared I was scrubbing the floors one day and the door into the shop wasn't quite closed and I overheard Antonov muttering, "We've knocked out two teeth, now we've got to knock out the third " So that's it, I thought, and that night I went off to Nikita He says to me, "I know that without you telling me and if you've decided to join up with us, you just keep watch on them but don't come round to me, if you find out anything pass it on to Stepanida, the spinster, I'm going into hiding for a bit "

"'And that was when I joined the cause, dear comrade I pretended I didn't understand anything and started treating the master more gentle like At that time he had taken to drinking heavily and he used to carry on like he was cock of

the walk, they were all riding high in those days I asked my man what was going on He, of course, gave me a simple answer, "Daylight robbery and the robbers have got to be wiped out like wolves " And he boasted, "We've settled the hash of two of 'em, and we'll do the same for the rest " So I asked, "Did they really kill Zuyev the deserter?" "Maybe," he says, "they drowned him," and then he scowled and says, "That bitch Stepanida is also going to come to a bad end " So off I went to her, to Stepanida, but she only laughs "Thanks," she says, "but I've noticed already that they've stopped loving me "

"'From her place I ran round to the Nesterovs "Look what's happening," I says to Uncle Yegor "Don't you get mixed up in these affairs," he advised me But now I couldn't help it! There was a family, the Mokeyevs, an old man with two daughters from different wives, the elder a soldier's wife and the younger still unmarried, poor folk they were, the old man was very godly and the soldier's wife was a famous weaver, she could weave patterns in three colours and she dyed the yarn herself, a spiteful woman she was, but less with me than with others She used to hold evening parties, a kind of women's club, and once or twice she invited me round too So I went, just to get away from my own misery And there, I found a lot of women, all of poor families and widows And then I couldn't help it, it just burst out of me, "Women," I says, "can't you see the Bolsheviks want real justice! Ignat was killed because he fought for the truth, and so was deserter Zuyev Hasn't the war taught you anything and can't you see who profited by it?" And you know, comrade, I won't boast, I'm not trying to impress you, I'm just saying what I heard from others afterwards I did manage to tell the women their whole lives in such a way that it made them cry I can still do it because I know the inside of everything and always talk on a practical level But that evening old Mokeyev was lying up on the ledge over the stove and listening and in the morning he passed on all that I had said to Antonov That evening the master locked up the shop, called me into the best room, and

there was Antonov and his son in law and two others, and Mokeyev was there too And he was the one who exposed me, told them straight she didn't only abuse you, she even abused God! That was a lie I never had any doubts about God in those days, I was like all the rest I used to go to church and pray at home He made all that up, the old devil! So they started trying me, intimidating me and questioning me But my master put in a word on my behalf, "She's a fool," he says, "she believes anything she's told Don't bother with her, I'll give her a lesson myself " And he did I lay on the floor for five days afterwards, I couldn't get up, I hadn't the strength to lift hand or foot I thought I never would '

" 'Still, as you see, I managed it! About three days later my lord and teacher went off to the local town, and in the night I heard a tap at the window Now they've come to kill me, I thought But it was Yegor Nesterov "Hurry up," he says, "get ready!" I went out into the street and there was a sledge and horses, all harnessed and ready to go And there in the sledge was Stepanida "Still alive?" she asks But I couldn't speak for the joy of knowing there were people to look after me!'

"She sniffed loudly and her eyes began to blink very fast A strange light came into her eyes and I half expected her to burst out crying, but she laughed instead in a very deep voice and rather like a child

" 'They took me to town that night and asked me a lot of questions and treated me and fed me up I'll never forget it all my life what a fuss they made of me, as if I was the one they loved best in the world All serious people they were There was Ustyugov and Lisa and another worker, Vassily Petrovich, funny chap he was Well you just can't describe it, I had fallen in with my own folk Uncle Yegor was surprised "I never trusted her," he says, "I thought she was spying for them " I lived in town for about four months and then the civil war began, for the Soviets, the kulaks had declared war on us and in our part of the country it was like a fairy tale frightening and yet there was fun in it! The

whole thing was such a muddle, you couldn't tell who was on what side Nikita advised me, "Mind how you go, comrade Anfisa Keep your ears sharp and open!" He taught me a thing or two and my head cleared a bit I was rushing around the whole district, either addressing women at meetings or doing a bit of scouting It's difficult for me to tell you about it all, there was so much of everything, it flows before my eyes like a river I did do some work then, glory be to the Lord!' "

"This godly utterance confused her She could not blush because her face was as red as a hot brick already, but she spread her arms and laughed, exclaiming guiltily, 'Oh, bother it all I never meant to say that! It's just habit, comrade! Those words are just an empty shell! There's no need to glorify your own people, is there? Their glory is in their deeds Well, never mind Yes, my dear man, I got a kick out of what I was doing Yegor Nesterov gathered together a little detachment, about thirty, and went to the village to punish them You see, they had been smashing up people's houses and farms Ivan had probably been killed anyway, he had disappeared and Stepanida's little house had been burnt down They had murdered Avdotya Mokeyeva and raped her sister Tanyusha she goes about half dotty to this day Yegor held a trial on the square Nikita Ustyugov made a speech and the people unanimously condemned Antonov, my master, and two others, Zotov the miller, and the priest They were shot then and there Dyukov slipped away, the police officer was killed in a gun battle, and old Mokeyev got his hair and beard shaven clean off now, they told him, you can go about like that! It was all so terrible, but, believe it or not, when they brought Mokeyev out into the street with his head shaven, he looked so funny that everyone laughed fit to drop, till the tears ran, and all the fear vanished amid laughter! It was Nikita thought of that joke Oh, he was a clever man, he was! They made him chairman of the village Soviet, and Lisa the secretary I was given a job too, I was busy with the women By now they all trusted me "You wouldn't have left a rich

way he argued that it's God makes life difficult you couldn't help believing him Well

"What happened was that in the heat of the chase our detachment pushed far on ahead, way beyond Kursk it was We were chasing Denikin and anyway it was a good old mix up all round, you couldn't tell where they were or where ours were Well, the comrades tell me, 'Off you go, Zausailov, try and find out who's on our left flank And how many And take a couple of lads of your own choice with you ' That was right, of course, seeing as I didn't know my letters So I took Sashok and Vassily Klimov a solid sort of chap, he was, like one of them senior janitors they used to have in Petersburg in the days of tsardom Aye, there used to be such janitors there he was, just a janitor, the son-of a gun, but he'd got the bearing of a church elder

"So off we go We didn't know the lie of the land, so we stuck to the railway Sashok and Klimov on one side of the embankment, me on the other, about a hundred paces ahead The track was all to pieces, of course It was a moonlit night, the wind was blustering around, clouds chasing along here a shadow, there a shadow and all of a sudden bang! 'Halt!' comes a shout Five of 'em I spotted Whites they may have been, but they were just the same colour as the earth and the bushes, lying low by the embankment Their commander, young fellow he was, hadn't even grown a moustache yet, revolver in hand, sword at his side, and one o' them little rifles over his shoulder fitted out good enough for a snapshot he was Well, he aims straight into my eye and starts interrogating and shouting at me, I, of course as if I was scared out of my wits, shouted at the top of my voice too, so that Sashok and Klimov would hear I'm running away from the Reds, I says, because I'm afraid of getting mobilised! And he was just beginning to believe me, when one of the soldiers give him the tip 'His bearing looks suspicious, Your Honour He must be a soldier, one of their spies!' Oh, you, rotten bastard, I thought So they beat me up a bit and sent me off under escort, with two of them to guard me The guards were in no hurry and it started

hives, all the same type, like a pack of wolves, miserable looking lot So I says to the comrades in town, there's something fishy going on here, lads! And they gave me a mission Try and convince them you're on their side Well, that was easy enough A pretty ignorant lot, they turned out to be, so bitter it had addled their brains The horse minder, he was a bit cleverer than the others and he showed up more often He had been a soldier, too, an artilleryman, and he was fifteen or twenty years older than me The thing that had got his back up was being banned from training horses On top of that he drank He was supposed to be the gang's adjutant, so to speak, and besides him there was a soldier from the Rostov regiment, a grenadier, and a fine accordion player too "

The boy pressed his cheek into the Red Army man's shoulder and dozed off and the girl sat with her elbows on her knees and her face between her hands, gazing out across the water with arched eyebrows The ship had come in close to the right bank and was passing a massive headland, below which lay a large village a single row of houses enclosed between two churches, like a line of print between brackets On the other side there was a shaggy looking sand bank cov ered with black bushes, and all this was gliding rapidly astern, as if it wanted to get out of sight as soon as possible

"The gang wasn't very big, about fifty all told It was commanded by some kind of official, a forest warden, I think, quite an ordinary bastard really But suspicious And these three keep on ordering me to find this out and find that out. And the comrades in town tell me what I can find out and what can't. They was keeping their forces scattered, you see ten here, ten there, murdering our people, burning down a school, in short, their trade was thuggery And my job was to get them all into a bunch, so that our lads could round 'em all up at once, like birds in a net. Well, we set a bait for them it was in the Borisoglebsk district, I remember, at an oil mill They seemed to trust me and started gathering their forces And then, the devil knows

defenders retreated into the forest And for about a year and a half, dear comrade, we had to wriggle like carp in a net, wherever we went there were Whites and sometimes the Reds turned White and the Whites came over to us Over the hills the big civil war was going on and Kolchak was being defeated But here we were fighting our own civil war and there seemed to be no end to it It was like a forest fire, we'd put it out in one place and it would flare up in another We even slipped across into the Osinsky *uyezd*; lot of poor folk there, all sack makers and rope makers Uncle Yegor was feeling bad, he had fallen under his horse and been wounded in the leg Near the town of Osa he was captured by the Whites, he and three others ran into some of their cavalry, two of them were killed outright and he was wounded The fourth, a grammar school boy from Perm, ran back to town, where I was with Lisa She sent me to see if there was anything we could do to help Uncle When I got there, Yegor was hanging from a tree, half naked and all covered in blood, as if they had torn the skin off him bit by bit terrible it was! And his right hand was missing I asked one of the sack makers what they had punished him for "He was a Bolshevik," he says. "A real one They tortured him and he just swore back at them! They tormented him out of his senses I reckon he was dead by the time they strung him up"

"Then I went a bit off my rocker, I was so sorry for my comrade! There was a crowd round the pier and I says to them, "Aren't you ashamed, you dogs? It's you that ought to be hanged, you heartless lot!" I didn't shout for long They took me off to the chief A grey haired old fellow, shaking as if he had some kind of fever and he gives his order, "The rod!" Well, they gave me twenty of the best with their cleaning rods and for a week I couldn't sit or lie down on my back It's a good job I've got that kind of body the more they beat it the firmer it gets It's like physical jerks. Yes, comrade, I've known some beatings in my time, no less than a mettlesome horse My skin's so bruised and battered I sometimes wonder if there's any blood left in me? But it

doesn't seem to matter I'm still alive and I don't com plain'"

At this point my companion stopped, pulled hard at a freshly lighted cigarette, stared down at his feet for a minute, then took a deep breath and went on with his story

"'I don't complain,' she said, and as I listened to her I couldn't help remembering the great empty gap in my life during those tragic years A gap that I had filled with .. complaining Then I asked, 'Well, how did things go after that?'

"'What happened after that?' she says. 'Well, at first, after our victory it wasn't any easier and it seemed a whole lot duller Some of the comrades, my close friends, had been killed, others had gone away on various jobs Lisa had gone to Yekaterinburg to study that was before it was called Sverdlovsk And I seemed to be all on my own The people in the village Soviet were all new and pussyfooted There was a lot they didn't know about our life and what they did know was only from hearsay A lad who had been with our partisans he died about two years ago of TB made up a little ditty about them

Our authorities sit on high,
Rumour is their reason why
The village Soviet that's us,
For the rest we don't give a cuss

"'Power was held locally in those days Later the New Economic Policy began I was attached to a state farm, but it failed, a new lot of kulaks grew up and grabbed everything In the winter I was a watchwoman at the school But what kind of watchwoman could I be? The schoolmaster was a quarrelsome old man, and sick, and he didn't like the children So I started working for hire again as a daily and from what I could see everything seemed to be sliding back again, downhill into a bog The women had become like animals, they wouldn't hear of anything except their own little corner My trouble is I don't know much about theory I'm ashamed of it but I haven't time to study Besides I'm

one of the practical kind, I don't know how to apply what's written to real life, to our everyday affairs I'm no hand at that kind of thing The only thing I do know is that it's all this sticking to your own corner that causes all our quarrelling and dissension, and our savagery, and makes our life so useless I know that the first thing is to reorganise everyday life and to start from the bottom, from the women, because everyday life rests on the women's strength, on their blood and sweat But how can you reorganise it when every woman is harnessed to her own household, very few know their letters and they haven't time to learn? The women's life had been taken over by pots and pans, children and washing I started trying to persuade them to arrange a public laundry, so that they wouldn't all have to wash and two or three of them could do it for the whole village, in turn Nothing came of it They were too shy and ashamed, everyone's linen was in a bad state When you washed it yourself, no one saw the holes or the dirt but at a public laundry everyone would know about everyone else They didn't say so, of course, I guessed it myself Instead they beat me over the question of soap "How are you going to arrange about the soap?" they said "One may have ten pieces of laundry and another four, so how about the soap?" Afterwards some of them admitted "The soap doesn't matter," they said, "but we could never stand the shame of it! When we're better off we'll build a public laundry and a public bath and a bakery " That was some consola tion when we're better off! "You silly creatures," I says, "it's getting rich that ruins us " But anyhow things are beginning to move a bit, we're abolishing illiteracy, we read *Peasant Woman* together and the *Peasants' News* is a great help, that I must say! That paper's a real friend Yes, dear comrade, we need a nursing home, and a nursery school, and we ought to turn Antonov's barn into a club-house for the women, it's a good log barn and it's been standing empty for nearly two years now '

"She started counting up what she needed on her fingers and there were not enough fingers, so she started counting

again, thumping her fist on the table, 'One, two ' And having counted up to thirteen necessities, she got quite cross and even poked me a couple of times in the ribs, saying, 'You don't give the women much attention, comrade, though you've been told that without the women you can't build socialism! Have you forgotten Bebel? And what did Lenin say? You'll never teach woman to govern unless you free her of trivial matters! And our *uyezd* committee and district committee sit around like bears in their dens and they won't shift even if you take a stick to them! All they can say is you're not the only pebble on the beach But the whole thing's as clear as daylight really, comrade If every woman has to fuss around over her own pot of soup, what shall we ever achieve? Yes, that's how it is We must be freed of this heavy work We must be given some leisure This is the third time I've had to tramp all the way here a hundred and twenty versts there and back, that makes 360 altogether call that a joke? That means half a month gone on walking Still, never mind I've said all I have to say, the whole lot, got it all off my chest Now I'll go to bed But you whip up those *uyezd* people for me, or I'll bring it up with the *gubernia* committee I wish they'd get on and enrol me in the Party, then I'd give them a real shake up!'"

My companion paused and asked, "Well? Isn't she great?"

"She'll do," I said

Then he took a breath and started telling me about himself

3 The wind plays over the banks of the shallow stream, over its sluggish, muddy water, and whirls about over the fire as though trying to put it out but actually fanning it to a bigger and brighter blaze There are some black stumps and roots from the bottom of the stream smouldering in the fire, they were pulled out on to the bank by summer visitors, the sun dried them, and now the fire is gnawing unwillingly at them with its golden fangs An acrid blue wisp of smoke spreads out down the stream,

the burning logs hiss, the leaves of the old willows rustle softly, and in tune with the soughing of the wind and the crackling of the fire comes the sound of a husky human voice

"We're cramped, cramped on the outside because of the laws, and on the inside too, in our souls They make any laws they like, for their own convenience "

The speaker is a stocky, thickset man in a shirt of homespun cloth, a waistcoat with brass buttons, and heavy boots that have not been tarred for a long time and look as if they had been riveted together out of roof iron He has a big round head covered with a thick grey stubble, his reddish fleshy face is also stubbly, evidently in the not so distant past he used to have a really thick and shapely beard Under his jutting forehead lurk a pair of cold bluish eyes, and from the way he looks at the fire and the sun one might think he was blind He speaks unhurriedly, thoughtfully, weighing his words

"God, they say, doesn't exist In our life of toil, of course, we never had time to take much interest in God Whether he existed or not that was beyond our ken, and not for us to decide, but all the same it seems wrong somehow when the youngsters shout against God God wasn't invented yesterday, you know, he's a habit from ancient times They've abolished the church festivals and what good has that done? People can drink vodka on weekdays as well But in the old days you would go to the bath house on the eve of the festival and give yourself a good steaming "

"You can go to the bath house on weekdays too, can't you?"

"Who says you can't? Of course, you can, but there's not the same relish in it. At festival time you'd go to church and you'd stand there "

"You go now, don't you "

"But there's not the same relish, citizen! Now the priest holds the service in such a timid way and there's no choir, and not enough candles in front of the ikons. Everything's

poorer But at one time the priest would strut along and make a fine show, the girls and the women would come, all dressed up in their best that was a proper sight! Now wild horses couldn't drag the boys and girls to church While the service is on they just play ball or skittles And the women too, the younger ones, have got right out of hand Nowadays a woman rebels against her husband, I'm not a horse she says "

His husky voice rose as he warmed to the subject He threw a few fresh chippings into the fire and ran his thumb along the blade of the axe He was building a small pier from the bank into the river It was not a difficult job All he had to do was drive two posts into the river bed and two posts into the bank, tie them with two planks and nail another four on top of them It should not have taken one man more than a couple of hours, but he was in no hurry and this was his second day on the job, although he was obviously handy enough with an axe and didn't like people who wasted time

On the other bank of the river some state farm animals, cows and horses, were grazing A lad came out of the trees with a bridle and walked up to a bay horse the horse trotted away from him and again began cropping the grass The loquacious old man paused in his task of stripping his post and began to watch the lad chasing the horse, muttering an ironic commentary

"There's a clumsy clown for you! Missed him again Well, I'll be What a blockhead! Grab his mane! Hi!"

The lad was in no hurry either It was a young Komsomol girl who eventually seized the horse's mane, whereupon he bridled it, scrambled belly first on to its back and cantered away with his elbows flying almost as high as his ears

"That's how they work took him half an hour to catch a horse," the old man said, lighting a cigarette "But if he was working for a master, he'd get a move on, the clumsy oaf!"

And still not hurrying, he resumed stripping the post, letting remarks slip out from under his clipped bushy moustache

"I wouldn't undertake to argue with you about the young folk They, of course, do what they do voluntary like, let us say But all the same we can't understand them It looks like they want to do everything at once Maybe they reckon to fix things so that by the 'fifties we'll all be living like lords Maybe it's because they reckon so that they are, let's call it fretting like this.

"But, of course, that's a word we use out of our ignorance We shouldn't say 'fretting', what we mean is taking action! And they're educated, you can see They take these here examinations for the high positions They all want to be more than just peasants Some of them get there Not far away from here there's a lad I used to know as a herdboy Later he was in the Red Army and now if you please! The old men have to take orders from him! He's a hero!

"At one time a lad would do his bit of foot slogging in the army for three or four years and come back to the village and still be one of us If he did show off his townee or army arrogance, it wouldn't be for long He'd swagger around for a year or so and then he'd again be one of us peasants in the full sense But now when he comes back after two years of that there Red Army he thinks he's king of the castle and he starts rightaway making an upheaval You can't see any real soldier in him, except his bearing, but he declares war on all of us peasant citizens, and there's no stopping him He's got neither beard nor whiskers, but he sets himself up as a teacher "

"Is what he teaches bad?"

The old man tossed the butt of his cigarette into the water, threw a chip after it and wrinkled his bristly face in a frown

"I'll tell you this straight, citizen The whole trouble is not that he teaches but that what he teaches is right, the son of a gun!"

"That doesn't make sense "

"Oh yes, it does! The trouble is that it hurts I knew what the score was all my life, but now it turns out I didn't know it properly, that I lived like a fool! That's the point! If he had got it all wrong, I'd be able to laugh at him, but as it is he piles into me and there's nowhere for me to turn He hasn't got a real grip on the management of things, he's too young But he's picked up a thing or two already If the earth had dragged the sinews out of him as it has out of me, he wouldn't be shouting about collective farms, he'd be shouting keep your hands off! Aye, that he would! Why does he try to make us join the collective? Because, you see, he has been trained as a tractor-driver it's to his advantage to sit up there on a machine and turn the wheel

"Of course, we understand, a machine makes things easier But then it carries an obligation, it's no good on a small field! If it was smaller, so that every farmer could have one to do his own land with, but the size it is now it knows no boundaries It gives its own orders, the brute either do your ploughing in common or pack up and get out of the village But where else can you go?

"All right, I'm not arguing, the big shots know what they're doing, they're trying to do their best for us We understand that, we're not fools All we're saying is that there's a lot of light minded belief about. The Komsomol, the Red Army men, the tractor-drivers they're all young folk, they haven't had time to think about life yet And that's where the confusion comes in "

He spat on his palm, gripped the half of the axe in a hand so red it looked burnt, and chipped away at the post with the same painstaking care that people who believe in punishment as the best means of education apply in thrashing a child After keeping silent for a while, he drove the post into the damp, yielding sand with the haft of the axe and said through his teeth

"Take, for example, my nephew He's my cousin's boy,

still he's a relation Yet now he's almost like an enemy of mine, he really is! He knows what's what, of course Even an animal wants to live well, let alone men You can't harness your neighbour to the plough, it's not allowed, so you need a horse, a machine that he understands They've learned to talk, they can outdo a priest at talking, while the old Reverend is puffing and blowing it's biff bang! And not only can we not hear what he's trying to say, but we aren't even interested They just put it to him straight, 'What have you been teaching the peasants all this time, what wisdom have you taught?' The priest answers, 'Our wisdom is not of this world ' And back they come with their, 'And which world is it that feeds you?' Aye It's not easy even for a priest to argue with these young heroes "

Having driven the post in half way, he gives it a couple of kicks, goes down on his knees, lights a fresh cigarette and mumbles something under his breath, as he tries to sort out his thoughts Then he addresses his- companion sternly

"You, citizen, have come here from afar, you'll stay here for a while and go away again, but we've got to live here till we die I've had fifty years of working life, so do I deserve a rest or don't I? But he takes me by the shirtfront, shakes me and starts shouting like a madman or a drunk What for, you ask? Because, so he says, I gave wrong evidence in court Our co-operators were being tried for misuse of funds, or something I didn't understand what it was all about. There certainly was an attempt to set fire to the shop, that everyone knows The court wanted to know the reason Why did they set fire to it? Some said it was to cover up their stealing, others said it was just an accident, when they'd had a drop too much to drink My nephew Sergei, his name is and two other comrades of his and a girl, they were the ones who started the whole business Before he came along, everyone seemed to be living quite all right, and as soon as he turns up they start snarling at each other like dogs This is wrong and that's wrong, and the way you live, he says, is worse than the barbarians, and anyhow He demands that they put me on

trial for allegedly giving wrong evidence about the co-operators "

He began to speak more and more incoherently and reluctantly, apparently very much annoyed with himself for embarking on this story He described his nephew in brief phrases that evoked a picture of an arrogant, restless, forceful character, tireless in pursuit of his aims

"He goes rushing about day and night It's all one to him He's here, there and everywhere and always thinking up trouble He's organised a fire brigade, makes us all clean our chimneys so there won't be any soot He's taught the kids to collect bones, and he fills up the women with all kinds of rubbish, and you know what a woman is gullible as they come He writes letters to the papers, he wrote about our schoolmaster And down they come and dismiss him And he had been with us for nineteen years and was a man we could trust in all our affairs. A proper adviser he was, he could find a way round any law And in his place they've sent some cheerful chappie, who right away starts demanding land for a garden plot round the school, so that the children can make experiments, he says."

One feels that in speaking of his nephew he is actually referring to many others, ascribing to his nephew the features and actions of his comrades and, without realising it himself, creating a type of restless, aggressive character In the end he reaches a point where he refers to his nephew in the feminine gender

"She gets the women together, and the girls "

"Who are you talking about now?"

"Still about his goings on There was Varvara Komarikhina, before he came along, she was an ordinary quiet woman, but now she's bossing everybody about. She ropes the women into the collective farms And, of course, as we know, the women always like to have a change They soon started their caterwauling about it being easier in the collective "

He spat, wrinkled up his face and fell silent, scratching at

the rust on the axe blade with his fingernail The stumps in the heart of the fire had burnt leaving only a dirty grey ash, but around them the bits of gnarled roots were still breathing smoke, the fire was eating them up reluc tantly

"When we were boys, we also ran wild after our own fashion," the old man said musingly "But ours was on quite a different scale! We didn't pitch into everything And they're only few in number, very few, but they're getting a hold over life The whole community's against 'em, these nephews of mine, but it's got nothing to defend itself with! And little by little the village is going over to their side That you've got to admit "

He rose, picked up a thick stick, weighed it on his palm and dropped it on to the sand again

"I understand it It's all ordained, as you might say You can't get away from it Only fools brandish their fists On the whole we old folk can understand if we're having our property curtailed and even taken away from us, it must mean the state has need of it The state is a man's protection, it won't do him harm for no reason "

He spread his arms, hunched his shoulders and con cluded with obvious perplexity on his bristly face and in his cold eyes

"But as for turning in our property voluntarily to the collective farm that we can't understand! Nobody does anything voluntarily, everyone lives by necessity, it's been like that from time immemorial Even Christ didn't go to the cross of his own free will he was ordered to by his father "

He paused and then, as he was trying the plank on the posts, he sneezed and ended plaintively, "Why can't they let us live the rest of our lives as we've always lived!"

He walked away from the fire and the wind flung a grey cloud of ashes after him With a grunt he picked up a plank from the ground and muttered, "We old folk have only a little bit of life left When we were young we never bothered

anyone No, never Live as you like, grow fat as a cat "

The embers are still smouldering and a blue wisp of smoke curls away over the stream

1930-1931

Notes

Anatoly Lunacharsky

A PORTRAIT

1 " neither was he like Luka " Luka is a hero of Gorky's play "The Lower Depths" typifying the consoler who prefers ennobling deception to the crude truth p 9

Leonid Leonov

A WORD ABOUT GORKY

1 " the scandal caused by the subsequent annulment of the title " In 1902, on a motion by Vladimir Stasov, Vladimir Korolenko and Nikolai Arsenyev, Gorky was elected Honorary Academician Tsar Nicholas II inscribed on Gorky's election papers "A highly eccentric choice!" The election results were declared invalid by the Academy In protest against these arbitrary actions on the part of the autocracy Honorary Academicians Anton Chekhov and Vladimi Korolenko turned in their diplomas p 21

2 " his second arrest, after January 9 " On January 9, 1905, known as Bloody Sunday, government troops opened fire on an unarmed crowd which intended to present a petition to the tsar Both shocked and infuriated by what he had seen Gorky wrote anappeal entitled "To All Russian Citizens and Public Opinion in the European States" for which he was put under arrest and imprisoned in the Peter and Paul Fortress p 21

3 " after a cursory glance through volume twenty six of his works " This refers to the Russian edition of Gorky's *Collected Works* in 30 volumes p 21

4 " into three clearly defined series " Gorky's *Complete Works* (in Russian) put out on the occasion of his

100th birthday consists of three series I Fiction (Supplement Variants of Works), II Letters, III Journalistic Work

p 24

5 " Sergeant Smury's unobtrusive chest " Gorky describes his acquaintance with Smury the cook who taught him to love books in his autobiographical story *My Apprenticeship*. p 26

6 " since the times of Kurbsky " Kurbsky, A M (1528 1583), Russian political and military figure and author of journalistic works p 28

7 " Alexander Radishchev decides oh horror! to offer for public discussion the disastrous plight of the serfs " Radishchev, A N (1749-1802), outstanding Russian writer, revolutionary enlightener His *Journey from St Petersburg to Moscow* (1789) contained a needle sharp criticism of serfdom in late 18th century Russia p 29

MAKAR CHUDRA

First published in the newspaper *Kavkaz* (The Caucasus) put out in Tiflis in 1892 signed M Gorky

"Makar Chudra" was Gorky's first printed story With this story also appeared the writer's pen name Maxim Gorky In his memoirs Gorky's friend A A Kalyuzhny, an old Narodnik revolutionary wrote "Alexei thought of his pen name himself Later he told me 'I couldn't come into literature as Peshkov, could I?'"

The idea of "Makar Chudra" arose in Tiflis and the story was also written there Both the author himself and his close associates attested to this fact In 1931 during the celebrations of Soviet Georgia's 10th anniversary Gorky wrote

"This is a marvelous holiday at which I would love to be present as a modest observer to remember once again the Georgia of forty years ago, to recall Tiflis, the town where I made my debut in literature

"I will never forget that it was in this town that I made my first wobbling step on the path I have been following for forty years now Perhaps, it was the country's majestic

nature and the poetic kindliness of its people these particular two features that transformed a vagabond into a writer "

Marxist critic V Vorovsky has given a profound analysis of Gorky's early works In an article "On Maxim Gorky", noting that Gorky's heroes and their psychological traits were a reflection "of modern man's social and economic position", he wrote "Having studied his heroes in life, knowing them from personal experience, Gorky marked out the fact, a sorry one for our society, that behind the rough shell of brutal morality or, to be more precise, ruthless practice of life, there are frequently hidden pearls of moral qualities of the kind which modern writers and thinkers seek in vain That force of character, though in practice it may be ill-directed, that eternal dissatisfaction with routine, an intense desire for something better, a longing for the unusual, for "the madness of daring" all these signs of a protest against the existing social order is that not a living incarnation of the ideal impulse towards which the best forces in modern society are aspiring and which they do not find in their milieu?"

Lenin's newspaper *Iskra* called Gorky "a gifted spokesman for the protesting masses" in 1902 Anatoly Lunacharsky regarded Gorky's early works as a reflection of the impending revolutionary storm

Gorky's first story has for many years now been staged in the theatre and set to music

Italian composer Vianshini wrote the opera *Radda* after "Makar Chudra" In 1912 this opera was accepted for the stage by the municipal theatre in Nizza.

The story's subject was also used in Soviet music. Asafyev's ballet "Beautiful Radda" was written after "Makar Chudra" Other musical works include symphonic poems by Z Levina, A Petrov ("Radda and Loiko") and by Yugoslav composer P Konievic ("Makar Chudra")

1 Galichina the historic name for part of South Poland and Western Ukraine Siezed by Austria in 1772, Galichina was called Galicia. p 42

2 " a soldier who fought under Kossuth " Lajos Kossuth (1820-1849) Hungarian politician, organiser of the Hungarian people's struggle against Austrian domination during the 1848-1849 revolution in Hungary p 44

3 Morava (Moravia) a region in central Czechoslovakia. p 44

MY TRAVELLING COMPANION

First published in *Samarskaya Gazeta* in 1894

"My Travelling Companion" is an autobiographical story In April 1891, "feeling himself out of place among intellectuals", the future writer left Nizhny Novgorod to wander through Russia From Bessarabia he went through Akkerman, Odessa, Nikolayev, Kherson, Perekop, Simferopol, Yalta, Feodosia, Kerch, Taman, the Black Sea coast, Kuban, Terek country along the Georgian Military Highway to Tiflis From Odessa to Tiflis he walked with a certain Tsulukidze who served as the prototype for Prince Shakro in "My Travelling Companion"

In Gorky's archive there is the following entry made by the writer in 1919 about the story

"This story was written 23 years ago I have gone through a great deal since then And a host of travelling companions similar to Shakro have walked by my side along different paths, at times diverting me from the (straight) road I do not want to complain about them or blame myself But every time someone got on my back and I had to carry him somewhere, I bore him as long as my strength and determination endured it and recalled Shakro my first travelling companion all the while repeating an old thought about him 'He is my travelling companion I could leave him here, but I shall never get away from him, for his name is legion .. He is my travelling companion for all my life He will walk beside me to the edge of the grave .'"

Anton Chekhov gave a high appraisal of "My Travelling Companion" in a letter to Gorky dated January 2, 1900 "Have I written how much I liked 'My Travelling

Companion' in your third volume? It is as good as 'In the Steppes' "

The essential meaning of "My Travelling Companion" was explained by Gorky in his essay "Lev Tolstoy", which also contains an appraisal of the great Russian writer In a conversation with Tolstoy in 1902 Gorky said that he liked "people of vigour who were intent on resisting life's evil by all means, even by violence" At this point, as Gorky recalls, Tolstoy interjected "But violence is the principal of all evil Take your 'My Travelling Companion' it was not thought up, and was fine precisely because it was not a work of imagination "

Tolstoy liked "*My Travelling Companion*" *in spite of the* fact that its philosophical message contradicted his views But when Gorky expounded on the idea of the story "For how long will we live in the stifling surroundings of sub-human creatures and unavoidable travelling compan ions we are building life on the transient sands of a hostile environment," Tolstoy smiled wrily finding this conclusion "extremely dangerous"

1 *Shampur* an iron rod on which the shashlyk is spitted and grilled p 63

2 Ataman Cossak headman, administrator of a village in time of peace, commanding officer when service is required of the semi regular Cossak levies p 76

3 *Bashlyk* a hood p 88

GRANDFATHER ARKHIP AND LYONKA

First published in the newspaper *Volgar* (Nizhny Nov gorod) in 1894

One of the first substantial critical analyses of the story was made by N Savin in the article "Children in Gorky's Works" (1907) Savin gave a high appraisal of the writer's skill in creating the image of Lyonka noting the little boy's unique qualities and the richness of his spiritual world "Lyonka", he wrote, "is not quite a usual child and his psychological make up hardly has a parallel in the whole of Russian literature about children "

1 " he wanted to set off back home, to Russia " by Russia Arkhip means the Central Provinces p 91

2 *Chokha*—a top garment with wide, fly away sleeves p 96

OLD IZERGIL

First published in the newspaper *Samarskaya Gazeta* in 1895

The story reflects the author's reminiscences of the time when wandering through Russia in the summer of 1891 he found himself in South Bessarabia and on the banks of the Danube River "These stories were told to me on the shore of the sea near Akkerman, in Bessarabia," he writes in "Old Izergil" In 1912 in an article dedicated to the memory of August Strinberg, Gorky wrote "I cannot help associating Strinberg with the image of the hero of a legend I heard on the Danube in my youth I am talking about Danko, hero and poet, who, in order to illuminate the path to light and freedom for people that had strayed in the darkness of life's contradictions, had torn the heart from his breast, lighted it and gone on ahead of the people "

Gorky regarded "Old Izergil" as one of his literary successes In the spring of 1906 in New York Gorky told a *Telegram* correspondent that he considered "Old Izergil" his best story

"Old Izergil" has been highly appreciated by the reading public P Zalomov, a Russian revolutionary and prototype of Pavel Vlasov in Gorky's *Mother* maintained that this story together with "Song of the Stormy Petrel" was of great help in the revolutionary struggle

Gorky's archive contains many readers' comments voic ing admiration for heroes who call for noble exploits in the name of human happiness

1 " rise up against you Russians" apparently this refers to the cholera rebellions of 1831 p 128

2 "He had just come bac k from helping the Greeks fight the Turks. " probably refers to the war of 1828 for the liberation of Greece p 129

3 "Why did you go to fight the Magyars?" refers most

likely to the Hungarian revolution of 1848 p 129

4 " he went away to fight the Russians " probably refers to the well known insurrection of 1863 in Poland p 130

CHELKASH

Initially published in the journal *Russkoye Bogatstvo* (Russian Treasures) in 1895

The story "Chelkash" is based on a real event The writer later wrote about the tramp who served as the prototype for Chelkash "I was amazed by the good natured irony of the tramp from Odessa who told me about the event described in 'Chelkash' I met him in hospital in the city of Nikolayev (Kherson) I remember his smile which revealed excellent white teeth and with which he ended his account of the treacherous act committed by a boy he had hired for a job "

Immediately after the appearance of "Chelkash" in print the story was singled out by critics and Gorky was declared an extoller of tramps

In 1898 1900 many articles on Gorky appeared in the press, reviews of his new works, and almost all of them gave tribute to the theme of tramps in Gorky's stories

Later, disavowing the legend of bourgeois critics that the vagabond was the true hero of his works, Gorky wrote

"Of course I never urged anyone to become a tramp but I do like people of action who value life and try to improve it even if a little bit, at least with a dream of a better life " Further he emphasised " This type of man is most frightening in his unruffled despair, in his rejection of himself and his disengagement from life " Having shown in the vagabond not a superman but above all a social type of person protesting against the existing social order, Gorky explained his attachment to him by the desire to depict unusual people, not narrow minded philistines

ONE AUTUMN

First published in *Samarskaya Gazeta* in 1895 with the subtitle "A Story by a Man Who Has Seen a Lot"

"One Autumn" is an autobiographical story On De c• mber 28, 1925 Gorky wrote to I Galant "I came to know my first woman when I was eighteen in circumstances truthfully described in the story 'One Autumn' " The story was apparently dear to Gorky as a page from his youth

SONG OF THE FALCON

First published in *Samarskaya Gazeta* in 1895

The author attached particular importance to "Song of the Falcon" In 1928 he wrote that the pressure exerted on him by the wearisome and poor life compelled him to introduce into this life such inventions and fables as the "Story of the Falcon and the Snake", "The Legend of the Burning Heart" and "Song of the Stormy Petrel" The writer's remarks on "active romanticism" which is a call for valiant deeds further specifies what he meant when talking about these inventions This accords with Gorky's underly ing assumption "I began my work as an inspirer of the revolutionary spirit by singing glory to the madness of daring "

"Song of the Falcon" was largely used in the revolu tionary movement P Zalomov, Pavel Vlasov's prototype, recalled "'Song of the Falcon' was of greater value to us than dozens of proclamations."

Lenin appreciated "Song of the Falcon " "What he liked most was *Mother,* articles in *Novaya Zhizn* on philistinism Vladimir Ilyich hated this trait himself 'The Lower Depths', 'Song of the Falcon', 'Song of the Stormy Petrel', and their spirit," pointed out Nadezhda Krupskaya Lenin entitled his article about Gorky written in 1914 "To the Author of 'Song of the Falcon'"

FOR WANT OF SOMETHING BETTER TO DO

First published in *Samarskaya Gazeta* in 1897

The story reflects the impressions left in the author's memory from the time when he worked at the stations of the Gryaze Tsaritsyn railway in the autumn of 1888 and spring of 1889

Later in the autobiographical story "Guard" Gorky wrote "My own youth and illiteracy did not prevent me from keenly feeling the possibilities of tragic and banal dramas concealed under the guise of 'holy and sincere prose of life' "

The story was praised by critics Gorky's contemporaries noted that he was carrying on the best traditions in Russian realist literature of the 19th century

N Mikhailovsky considered the story to have a meaning ful content and excellent form In an article "Literature and Life" he wrote "The most sensitive ear will not hear a single false note and the strictest writer will not cross out or add a single word in this story Though there is not one vagabond here and nobody complains about the 'abyss of life', the reader, even without the author's prompting him, will exclaim 'What an abyss! What a terrible abyss is this life in which such a horrible offence to human dignity is possible and just for want of something better to do! People are bullied not in a fit of anger but precisely for boredom's sake as a substitution for real life And these cruel 'teasers' who perpetuate the mockery but know not what they are doing, in spite of their callousness, evoke even more regret than their victims for they, too, are made a prey of this abyss "

KONOVALOV

First published in the journal *Novoye Slovo* (New Word) in 1897 with large omissions made by the censorship

Gorky's attempt to publish "Konovalov" as a separate book was a failure

"Konovalov" is an autobiographical story The events described in it took place in Kazan and Feodosia. Gorky

lived in Kazan in 1884 1888 and later he wrote about this period

"When I was 15 years old I acquired a fierce desire to study with which aim I travelled to Kazan thinking that those who are eager to learn are taught the sciences free of charge It turned out that this was not the case, as a result of which I got a job at a bakery for 3 rubles a month This was the hardest work I ever did in my life

"In Kazan I became close friends with the have beens viz 'Konovalov' and 'The Have Beens' "

The bakery described in "Konovalov" is Semyonov's enterprise which acquired lasting fame through Gorky's stories "Master", "Twenty Six Men and a Girl" and "My Universities" The future writer got a job at Semyonov's as an assistant baker in November 1885 and soon after he met Alexander Konovalov there Semyonov's bakery was placed in a damp and deep basement The workday lasted for seventeen hours The inhuman conditions provoked a strike among the workers in 1886

One of the most revealing statements Gorky made on Konovalov's character is contained in the article "On Plays" Gorky considers him in the broad sense as a social type from the world of the have beens, to this type he attributed "not only wanderers, inhabitants of doss houses and in general the lumpen proletariat but also a certain part of the intelligentsia who have lost their vigour, are disillusioned, outraged and humiliated by their failure in life"

1 "Gerasim and his dog " the hero of Turgenev's story "Mumu" p 221

2 " the sad tale of Pila and Sysoika " refers to the story by F Reshetnikov (1841 1871) "Podlipovtsy" p 226

3 N I Kostomarov (1817 1885) historian, author of the book *Stenka Razin's Uprising* p 233

4 "Poor people" Dostoyevsky's first story Makar Devushkin is the story's hero p 235

5 Usolye a town in the upper reaches of the Kama River p 236

6 "Glass Works" an old glassware factory near Kazan owned by a merchant and Old Faith believer V Savinov Later it was the site of a worshipping place for a sect prohibited by order of the government in the 1850s After this the factory served as a place for the homeless p 236

7 Captain Prozorovsky was badly wounded during the storming of Astrakhan by Stepan Razin Razin ordered him to be thrown off a tower p 240

8 " Turks from Anatolia " Anatolia is the old name of the Asia Minor Peninsula where Turkey is situated p 257

9 " a book about an English sailor " refers to Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe.* p 261

THE ORLOV FAMILY

First published in the journal *Russkaya Mysl* (Russian Thought) in 1897

The story dwells on the events of 1892 when the general dissatisfaction of the popular masses was manifested most revealingly in the cholera rebellions

Critic Vorovsky, in the article "On Maxim Gorky" (1902) analysed in detail "The Orlov Family" and showed the social causes contributing to the appearance of Grigory Orlov and his type, anti social and anarchistic in psychological inclinations Vorovsky thought the story most excellent from the publicistic viewpoint

THE READER

Originally appeared in the journal *Kosmopolis* in 1898

The story was conceived by the writer as a confession revealing his aesthetic credo The constructive platform it set forth coincided almost word for word with the author's statements concerning literature made at the time "My purpose is to awaken man's pride in what he is, to let him know that he is the most worth while and important thing in life, that he is a divine creation and that excepting him there is nothing truly worth attention," wrote Gorky to Pyatnitsky on July 25, 1900

Gorky's contemporaries found their own thoughts in Gorky's writings On November 17, 1899 Repin wrote to Gorky concerning the third volume of his *Stories and Essays* "In all these works ("The Reader" is included in the stories he mentions) one senses the pounding of the author s passionate heart " Leonid Andreyev hurried to debate "outstanding issues" with the writer "I await a conversation with you on everything that torments me and drives me to despair with the utmost impatience I mean the same questions you have touched upon in 'The Reader' "

TWENTY SIX MEN AND A GIRL

Published originally in the journal *Zhizn* (Life) in 1899

The work is based on the writer's impressions of life in Kazan and his work in Semyonov's bakery In *My Universities* Gorky wrote "I have outlined this period in my life in stories 'Master', 'Konovalov' and 'Twenty Six Men and a Girl', it was a difficult but instructive time "

The story was highly praised by outstanding Russian writers and public figures

Nadezhda Krupskaya writes in her memoirs "Lenin and Gorky" "Vladimir Ilyich appreciated Alexei Gorky as a writer very much / ./ he liked such works by Gorky as 'The Creepy-Crawlies' and 'Twenty Six Men and a Girl' " In June 1934 Krupskaya wrote to Gorky "I kept remembering your story 'Twenty-Six Men and a Girl', one of my favourites "

Chekhov wrote to Gorky on February 15, 1900 "'Twen ty Six Men and a Girl' is a fine story, better than anything else published in *Zhizn*. The story conveys the atmosphere of the place, you can almost smell the rolls "

Vikenty Veresayev was exuberant about the story and wrote Gorky on January 20, 1900 "'Twenty Six Men and a Girl' is a miracle and I would like to congratulate you on it "

Lev Tolstoy also liked the story, he particularly praised the beginning

Gorky himself, in an article entitled "How I Learnt to Write" called it one of his first realist stories Telling about

the reason underlying the appearance of such works he said "I was bursting with impressions, I just had to write"

SONG OF THE STORMY PETREL

Originally printed underground on a hectograph in *Autumn Melodies* editions at the end of 1901 First came out as a separate work in the journal *Zhizn* (Life) for 1901

At the time the writer was connected with the Moscow organisation of *Iskra* and carried on revolutionary propaganda in Nizhny Novgorod among students and workers initiating broad public protest against the persecution of students "My heart is filled with the dawning of spring and I deeply inhale the fresh air," he wrote to Leonid Andreyev in the spring of 1901

The appearance of "Song of the Stormy Petrel" alarmed the gendarmerie The censorship soon realised that it had committed a grave error "Song of the Stormy Petrel" served as a pretext to ban the journal, the issue in which it was published turned out to be the last

Among progressive circles in Russian society "Song of the Stormy Petrel" was greeted as a passionate revolutionary proclamation, the work was widely circulated in underground editions In the article "The Proletarian Writer's Road into the Underground" Y Yaroslavsky wrote "'Song of the Stormy Petrel', that battle hymn of the revolution, was of particular importance It is doubtful that another work can be found in our literature that has gone through so many editions as Gorky's 'Petrel' It was reprinted in every town, it was circulated in copies printed on hectographs and typewriters, it was copied by hand, read and reread in workers' and student circles Probably there were several million copies of 'The Petrel' in those years"

Vladimir Lenin resorted to the images of "Song of the Stormy Petrel" in 1906 in an article entitled "Before the Storm" "All the signs indicate that we are on the eve of a great struggle All efforts must be directed towards making it simultaneous, concentrated, full of that heroism of the masses which has marked all the great stages of the great

Russian revolution Let the liberals cravenly hint at this coming struggle solely for the purpose of threatening the government, let these narrow minded philistines concen trate the whole force of their 'mind and sentiments' on the expectation of a new election the proletariat is preparing for the struggle, it is unitedly and boldly marching to meet the storm, eager to plunge into the thick of the fight We have had enough of the hegemony of the cowardly Cadets, those 'stupid penguins' who 'timidly hide their fat bodies behind the rocks'

"'Let the storm rage louder!'"

Gorky himself was called "the Petrel" by critics and reporters and later in poetry and folklore

THE ICE IS MOVING

Published for the first time in the journal *Vestnik Evropy* (European Herald) in 1912

The action takes place in 1883 1884 when Peshkov worked in Nizhny Novgorod as a foreman for V Sergeyev

1 " to write in ecclesiastical capitals " old Slavic letters, known as Cyrillic A special civil type was introduced by Peter I in 1708-1710 instead of the old Slavonic used ever since only in church books. p 370

2 ". like the whale's in the story of the 'Little Humpbacked Horse' " a story by P Yershov (1815 1869) written after folklore themes p 384

A MAN IS BORN

Originally published in the journal *Zavety* (Behests) in 1912

The story is autobiographical In summer 1892 Peshkov worked with the famine-stricken population on the building of the Sukhum Novorossiisk road After the work was finished, on the way to Ochamchiry he had to act as midwife " The birth of a man? Yes indeed, there was such a day " recalled Gorky in 1927

The first reference to the idea of the story "A Man Is Born" goes back to the spring of 1912 On March 4(17)

Gorky told Ivan Bunin the story of how he had delivered a woman of a child Later, in July 1912, Bunin wrote to Gorky "I am proud that I convinced you to write about the birth of a man Do you remember when it was? We once went for a walk to see a comet very late at night, along the road to Anakapri" Gorky answered "Of course I remember that it was you who convinced me to write 'A Man Is Born' and I regret that it didn't occur to me to dedicate the story to you"

Gorky attached great importance to the story as a programme work

1 " It was in the famine year of '92 " in 1891 1892 nearly half of Russia's gubernias were struck by famine p 396

2 The Kodor a river in Abkhazia p 394

3 " recalled Kobyli Lozhok, Sukhoi Gon, Mokrenki " Gorky cites names of villages typical for the central part of the country p 396

THE CREEPY-CRAWLIES

Originally published with censorship omissions in the journal *Letopis* (Chronicle) in 1917

The work is autobiographical The 21 year-old narrator is a kvass vendor In 1889 when he lived in Nizhny Novgorod, Peshkov worked at a beer storehouse and delivered kvass to shops and residences and sold it at marketplaces and squares

The story "The Creepy-Crawlies" was staged in the theatre many times V Beklemisheva recalled a performance in the Moscow Art Theatre

"I came to watch the play when Gorky was also in the theatre In the middle of the performance he suddenly stood up and walked out I thought that he wasn't feeling well and asked Lazareva who sat next to me

"'What's wrong with him? Is he ill?'

"'During the last performance, too, he couldn't keep back his tears and went out,' she answered

"Later in the lobby Gorky told me in a conversation

"'I can't watch it calmly, it's so vivid as if it happened only yesterday'"

1 The Russian for God is *Bog Bogadelnya* is the Russian for almhouse The second part of the word might have been derived from *delat* to make *Ed.* p 420

FIRST LOVE

Originally printed in the book M Gorky, *My Universities,* Berlin, Verlag "Kniga", 1923 Later also appeared in the journal *Krasnaya Nov* in 1923

"First Love" is autobiographical

Peshkov met O Kaminskaya in June 1889 Their life together did not last for long After two years they parted forever According to Kaminskaya, who died in June 1939, they met only once after not seeing each other for thirty years

The work "First Love" enjoyed a wide appeal among readers and critics "I am extremely fond of your writings," wrote Zweig to Gorky on August 29, 1923 from Zalsburg, 'I have been deeply moved by your description of your *first marriage* in 'Recollections' It's been many years since I have been so impressed by a book In German literature there is no writer whose works contain such spontaneous truth I know that it may also be achieved by artistic means and perhaps even skillful devices But your *spontaneity* strikes me as unique even Tolstoy is not so natural in his narrative "

The author was particularly delighted by Korolenko's review of the story which has not been found yet but of which we may judge from Gorky's answer "I am flattered," he wrote on October 7, 1925 to his mentor's daughter, "to know that you liked 'First Love' I wrote this chapter of my memoirs with fear I was afraid that I would seem miserable and unhappy and would besides offend a lady The latter was particularly worrying me I didn't, did I? A French man, Romain Rolland, called this a striking work He is a friend of mine and I value his praise highly But in this case a lady's opinion of the story is more important "

1 "Not long ago she died " Gorky was mistaken This

was how he explained this mistake to O Ivina Loshakova, Kaminskaya's daughter, in a letter dated April 14, 1928 "In autumn 1921 I learned in a letter sent from Vyatka that Olga had died of pneumonia

"Today I received a letter saying that both of you are in good health but have some financial difficulties I would like to help you very much, if you don't object to it and if my aid will not offend either O Y or you " p 452

TALES OF HEROES

Originally published in the journal *Nashi Dostizheniya* (Our Achievements) in 1930 1931 The present volume includes the first story from this series

There is evidence that Gorky intended to continue the series of works about heroes and write a whole book entitled *Stories about Heroes* However, he was so engaged in work on *The Life of Klim Samgin* and his extensive public activities that he did not have time to carry out his intention to write a book about ordinary Soviet people, heroes of our day

1 "I was at Lyaoyan " refers to the battle of August 17 21, 1904, near Lyaoyan (Manjuria) which ended in defeat for the Russian army commanded by A Kuropatkin p 461

2 " the fronts from Chernovitsi and all the way to Riga." reference to the First World War of 1914 1918 p 461

3 " was chasing Mr Denikin " the beginning of the destruction of Denikin's army was laid in the Orel and Kromy offensive (from October 11 to 27, 1919) In March 1920 Denikin's troops were routed out in the North Caucasus. p 462

REQUEST TO READERS

Progress Publishers would be glad to have your opinion of this book, its translation and design and any suggestions you may have for future publications

Please send all your comments to 17, Zubovsky Boulevard, Moscow, USSR

-/-

Volume I of Gorky's Collected Works includes a broad selection of his stories Among them is "Makar Chudra", "Chelkash", "Old Izergil", and a number of other stories written in the 1890s, which opened Gorky's road to world fame The collection also contains stories from the series "Wandering About Russia" created in 1912 1913, and, finally, stories belonging to the last period of his work



"...Gorky's is an enormous artistic talent which has been, and will be, of great benefit to the world proletarian movement."

V.I. Lenin